

OBLIVION REMASTERED

PC GAMER



ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL
THE WITCHER 3

**CELEBRATING THE LEGENDARY FANTASY RPG WITH
INSIDER STORIES AND SECRETS DIRECT FROM CDPR**

MARATHON

FUTURISTIC EXTRACTION FPS



ISSUE 410

REMATCH

ARCADE FOOTBALL ACTION

CYBERPOWERPC



Ultra 7 Z890

STARTING FROM **£1899**

CPU	Intel® Core™ Ultra 7 265KF
GPU	NVIDIA® RTX™ 5070 - 12GB
RAM	2 x DDR5 16GB 5200MHz
STORAGE	2TB NVMe SSD
OS	MICROSOFT® WINDOWS 11 HOME



Infinity 149

STARTING FROM **£2599**

CPU	Intel® Core™ 14th Gen i9 14900KF
GPU	NVIDIA® RTX 5080 16GB
RAM	2 x DDR5 16GB 5200MHz
STORAGE	2TB NVMe SSD
OS	MICROSOFT® WINDOWS 11 HOME



Infinity X145 Elite

STARTING FROM **£999**

CPU	Intel® Core™ 14th Gen i5 14400F
GPU	NVIDIA® RTX 4060 8GB
RAM	2 x DDR5 16GB 5200MHz
STORAGE	2TB NVMe SSD
OS	MICROSOFT® WINDOWS 11 HOME



Infinity Z890 Elite

STARTING FROM **£2999**

CPU	Intel® Core™ Ultra 9 285K
GPU	NVIDIA® RTX 5080 16 GB
RAM	32GB DDR5 6000MHz
STORAGE	2TB NVMe SSD
OS	MICROSOFT® WINDOWS 11 HOME

NEXT DAY PCs



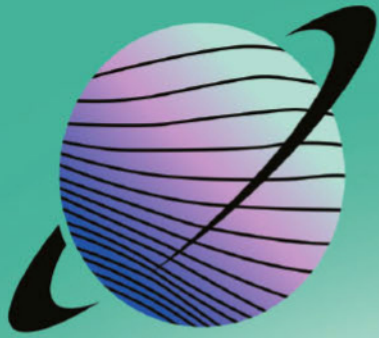
**ORDER TODAY
GAME TOMORROW**



✉ sales@cyberpowersystem.co.uk

☎ 03333-237776

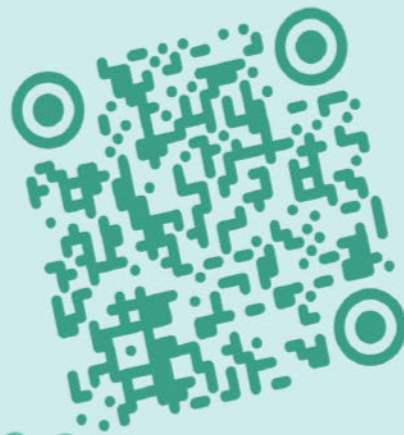




PLANETARY PROCESSING

MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES? EASY.

**WE DO THE HEAVY LIFTING SO
YOU CAN DO THE FUN STUFF.**



PC GAMER

#410 JULY 2025

Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

facebook.com
/pcgamer magazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer**PC GAMER**
Forum

forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER PRESENTS
PC
GAMING
SHOWpcgaming
show.com

All contents © 2025 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/ services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: June 19, 2025

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.



Member of the
Audit Bureau of
Circulations
12,708
January
December 2018



Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

"THE WITCHER 3 IS THE BEST FANTASY ACTION-RPG OF ALL TIME"



Legendary. That's the word that comes to my mind when *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is ever mentioned. For me and millions of other gamers worldwide, it is not just the best fantasy action-RPG of all time, but one of the best games ever made, too. CD Projekt RED made history when it released Geralt of Rivia's finest gaming adventure.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@rnicolasj**This month**

Was found butt naked in the back room of Passiflora in Novigrad. The reason? No, not that! Once again, he'd lost too many games of strip Gwent. When will he learn?

As such, on *The Witcher 3*'s tenth anniversary, PC Gamer travelled to CDPR's HQ in Poland to get the definitive, world-exclusive story of how the legendary game was made, with insider stories and secrets in bountiful supply. Enjoy!

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p54

The PC Gamer team

**DANIELLA LUCAS**Twitter
@daniellamlucas**This month**

Bent it like Beckham in a football arena located under the sea. Sebastian the crab said hi. How nice.

**JOSHUA WOLENS**Twitter
@joshuawolens**This month**

Heroically slew no less than 14 separate interviews to deliver our incredible cover feature.

**TIM CLARK**Twitter
@timothydclark**This month**

Stormed PCG Towers with a Nerf gun to extract goodies. There's no Tangfastics left now.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**Twitter
@robinvalentine**This month**

Merged souls with a ninja to defeat his foes. Oh, and in *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound* he...

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170). July issue 410, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Contents

#410
JULY 2025

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p54



Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

Bethesda gives *Oblivion Remastered* keys to modders making their own remaster

10 THE SPY

New gaming rumours investigated

12 SPECIAL REPORT

What happens when rare games turn up on Steam?

14 INCOMING

The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

16 Rematch

22 Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound

24 Endless Legend 2

28 Stygian: The Outer Gods

30 Marathon

34 Deliver At All Costs

35 Cairn

36 Void Sales

37 Duck Detective: The Ghost of Glamping

37 A Gentleman's Dispute

Features

40 The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

56 The 15 best mail delivery games on PC

40



16 REMATCH

Daniella Lucas travels to Paris, France, to go hands on with Sloclap's exciting new arcade football game, and discovers a future classic in the making.

30 MARATHON

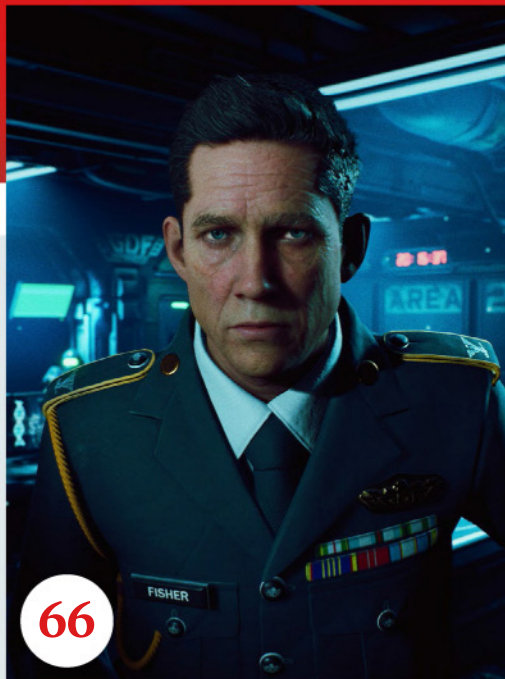
Tim Clark assembles a crack team of mercenaries to go and extract valuable materials on futuristic alien worlds. The new Bungie FPS is here, and it looks set to cook.

40 THE WITCHER 3

On the tenth anniversary of the now legendary fantasy action-RPG, PC Gamer speaks to CD Projekt Red to get the definitive inside story on its development, launch and legacy.

72





66 TEMPEST RISING

Rick Lane commands and conquers his way through PCG's official review of this fantastic new RTS game, one that both honours classics and evolves the genre.

102 PC BUILD OF THE MONTH

The PC Gamer hardware lab's part-by-part guide to creating a RGB-maximised gaming PC.

124 OUTLAST

Elie Gould returns to the misery of Mount Massive Asylum to see if this survival horror classic still has the power to scare and creep. Heart rates will soar!

Reviews

- 66 Tempest Rising
- 70 Blue Prince
- 72 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered
- 76 Expelled! An Overboard Game
- 78 Clair Obscur: Expedition 33
- 82 Old Skies
- 84 South of Midnight
- 85 The Last of Us Part 2 Remastered

FREE GAMES

- 86 Ephemeral Frame
- 87 Dull Acres
- 87 Untime
- THEY'RE BACK**
- 88 Firewatch
- 89 A Short Hike
- 89 The Hunter: Call of the Wild

Hardware

- 92 GROUP TEST
- 98 TECHREPORT
- 100 TECHTALES
- 102 THE BUILD
- 104 BUYER'S GUIDE

Extra Life

108 NOW PLAYING

Betrayal at Club Low, Assassin's Creed Shadows, Look Outside, Like a Dragon: Pirate Yakuza

108 UPDATE

Overwatch 2's new perk system

114 MOD SPOTLIGHT

Top Monster Hunter: Wilds mods

116 HOWTO

Win in Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

118 DIARY

A crazy continuation of our Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines diary

122 WHY I LOVE

The joy of rivals in video games

124 REINSTALL

Scare 'em up Outlast replayed

128 MUST PLAY

Deep Rock Galactic, Windblown, Sable, Pacific Drive, Snowrunner

[MONITOR]

NEW DEVELOPMENT



Bethesda promises it won't send *Skyblivion* to meet Sithis.

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Bethesda gives **OBLIVION REMASTERED** keys to modders making their own remaster

Fan-made remakes of popular games are a risky thing. You never know when you're going to sink years of your life into a passion project, only to eat a cease and desist letter from an expensive lawyer representing a faceless corporate overlord that forces you to either change it up or shut it down entirely. That seemed like a real risk for *Skyblivion*, the ambitious, long-running effort to recreate *Oblivion* in the *Skyrim* engine, especially after it became clear that Bethesda was working on its own official *Oblivion* remaster.

Happily, in this case the outcome was very different: Instead of forcing an end to *Skyblivion* to protect its commercial interests, Bethesda sent a key for *Oblivion Remastered* to everyone working on it.

"Huge thanks to our friends @bethesda.net for their continued support of *Skyblivion*!" the

**IT'D BE NICE TO
SEE MORE OF THIS
SORT OF THING IN
THE FUTURE**

mod team wrote on X. "As massive fans, we're beyond grateful for the generous gift of *Oblivion Remastered* game keys for our entire modding team! This means so much to us. Thank you for everything, @bethesda.net!" And, to assuage any concerns that this is all a fake-out, the team said in a follow-up message that, "Bethesda made it clear that they have no intention of shutting down our project".

Of course, it could be a double-secret fake-out: give the *Skyblivion* team a truckload of *Oblivion Remastered* keys, and then just wait for everything to grind to a halt while they blow a year or two playing it. I

GET A JOB

OBLIVIOUS REMASTERED



Ex-Blizzard boss Mike Ybarra wasn't convinced that *Oblivion Remastered* would garner much attention as it could "never hold up against modern masterpieces like *Elden Ring*". He went on to say how players simply have higher standards nowadays. It has now sold 1.4m copies (and counting) on Steam. ■

ALL GROWN UP

HAPPY BIRTHDAY USB 2.0



There's a 25-year-old bit of tech still getting jammed into the most powerful gaming PC: the USB 2.0 port. Limited to 480 Mbps it's not the fastest, but it's been a PC companion for the past quarter century and if it's good enough for Apple to use in its Type-C iPhones, it'll still do the job in your PC. ■DJ

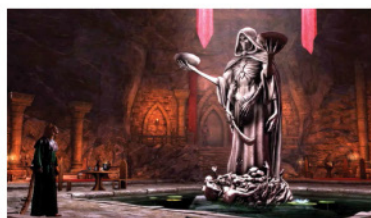


COVER-UP

UBI PUTS BREASTS BACK



Tragedy struck when a patch for 12-year-old game *Far Cry 4* covered up a character's, ahem, chest. Was this censorship? A conspiracy? An attack on free-thinking gamers everywhere? No. Ubi just mixed up its Japanese and global builds for the game, and had to patch the nudity back in and apologise. ■JW



TOP: This town is, in fact, big enough for the both of us.

ABOVE: Can gaming contain the power of a *Skyrim*-ified Adoring Fan?

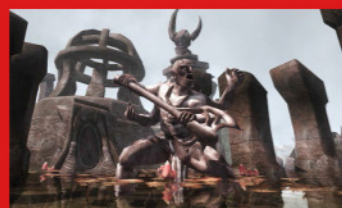
would 100% fall for that. The *Skyblivion* team recently expressed "all love and no hate" for *Oblivion Remastered*, despite its potential to steal their thunder, saying their mod "always was a passion project and still is until the end", and it's great to see Bethesda reply in kind. It's probably over-optimistic but it'd be nice to see more of this sort of thing in the future.

COMING OF AGE

If you're not getting your fill from *Oblivion*'s official remaster, *Skyblivion* says it's still on track for a release later this year. It'll be an interesting comparison – as pretty as it is, *Oblivion Remastered* still maintains all the oddness and eccentricities of Bethesda's 2006 game. By putting the game into *Skyrim Special Edition*, *Skyblivion* will iron out a lot of those quirks (and replace them with, well, *Skyrim*'s quirks).

Anyway, speaking of things that are nice, release went exceedingly well for *Oblivion Remastered*: less than 12 hours after launch it surpassed 150,000 concurrent players on Steam alone – more than double the peak of *Skyrim Special Edition* – the user reviews are good, some mods work, and players aren't even mad about the new horse armour. Can't ask for anything more than that. ■
Andy Chalk

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Tamriel (more) Rebuilt

Tamriel Rebuilt, which aims to rebuild all of *Morrowind*, just got a new huge expansion.

Promises made

Swen Vincke says he'll have news about Larian's next game no later than 2030, because his wife will leave if it takes longer.

Really long dark

The end of *The Long Dark* is in sight after over a decade in development.

Uh oh

Discord confirms it's moving toward 'becoming a public company' as it hires a former Activision executive as its new CEO.

Bunch of jokers

YouTube is conducting a review after mistakenly hitting *Balatro* videos with an age restriction.

Oblivion Demastered

Oblivion Remastered's first update broke upscaling on Game Pass (it's fixed now).

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Sequels are a major part of the PC gaming industry, with HD remakes and remasters getting in on the action too. Chatter about *Half-Life 3* has intensified recently, but *The Spy's* sources have yet to bring in solid information on this, and several have gone missing.

Hardware gets sequels too, of course, and Intel's latest change from Core to Core Ultra has set the cat among the cyber-pigeons by managing to perform worse on the desktop than the 14th-gen chips it replaced, while AMD has sailed up the rankings with its 9800X3D chip. It has become a three-act tragedy for Intel, as its rival now commands the console and handheld PC markets too.

Such things are usually beneath *The Spy*, who prefers the order and method of the games themselves rather than the machines they play on, which come and go with a depressing regularity reminiscent of lovers, archenemies, and of course sources within Valve.

There is one piece of hardware that does attract *The Spy's* attention, however, and that's the Steam Deck. Again, the problem with sources dropping through unexpected portals for an appointment with death is ever present, but there have been pronouncements from Valve on this subject.

And they've all been negative. Denials are more than just rivers in Egypt to *The Spy*. It is enough for *The Spy* to sit back in *The Spy's* chair and think. The past is the past, it is the future that matters, and the truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to seekers after it. Valve does not seem interested in releasing iterative improvements to the Deck, but appears instead to be waiting for a large generational jump.

The Steam Deck has proven itself to be good enough for many purposes as long as you don't mind 30fps and low graphics settings, but there are games that have no interest in running on it. Do not derange yourself, however, as there are more handhelds from ASUS, MSI, Lenovo and more that have slightly better specs, though none is as capable as the lowliest GeForce card.

The recent release of the AMD Ryzen AI+ 395 chipset, with its mighty iGPU, has rekindled *The Spy's* interest in

handheld gaming, though it has yet to arrive in anything more portable than the ASUS ROG Z13 gaming tablet. The launch, too, of the AMD Z2 Extreme chip was greeted with a denial by Valve.

SLIP OF THE TONGUE

It is a profound belief of *The Spy* that if you can induce a person to talk to you for long enough on any subject, sooner or later they will give themselves away. Back in 2023, Valve's Lawrence Yang went on the record at Bloomberg to say "a 'next-generation' power upgrade... won't be available for at least two or three years".

There's one more tantalising possibility: that there may never be another Steam Deck, but that SteamOS may become the operating system of choice for handheld PCs from other manufacturers, cementing Valve's place as the lurking figure of PC gaming that you half glimpse in the twilight, and who at a second glance is gone. That was Gabe. There is an even more terrible possibility that you have not considered. It might have been *The Spy*. *Spy out.* ■
The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy has many little grey cells and likes to exercise them.

Add a splash of colour

Forge 5070 Ti PC Colour Series



Created to take gaming to a new level. Powered by the revolutionary NVIDIA GeForce RTX 5070 Ti and AMD Ryzen 7 9700X and engineered for enthusiasts. Choose from one of four exclusive colourways and customise to your own spec.

chillblast.com

Chillblast
GAME.CREATE.WIN

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



RPGs often end up appreciated too late, pushing prices up.

IDENTITY CRISIS

What happens when **RARE GAMES** turn up on Steam?

Once upon a time I happily handed over \$170 for *Ys: The Oath in Felghana* for my trusty Windows XP machine. It certainly felt like a lot, but I didn't regret my purchase. That was just what a rare, obscure, never-to-be-translated (as we believed at the time) Japanese PC exclusive cost back then – I either paid up or missed out.

In the distant past of 2005 the entirety of Falcom's PC catalogue was little more than impenetrable curiosities of next to no interest to most people, only available via tiny boutique websites or by emailing a guy who knew a guy. Their embossed, oversized boxes looked special, and by extension they made me feel special too – proof I'd put in the time, money, and effort.

Thanks to Steam my old wallet-busting purchases seem more than ridiculous today – they almost sound impossible. It's been years since *Felghana* was anything other than another action-RPG on a store stuffed with them, frequently on sale for the price of a coffee. It's the most terrifying and exhilarating trial any rare game can go through. Stripped of its scarcity and collector's clout, and forced into the colosseum of public opinion, do these games still feel as good to buy and play when there's no 'point' to owning them beyond personal pleasure?

REEVALUATING RARITIES

Suikoden II's one of the most recent games to receive this treatment, and life's been one heck of a roller-coaster for Konami's now-beloved RPG. It's been praised from the rooftops for so long it's easy to believe the game's always been understood and adored, but in truth early reactions to the game's English release were actually pretty tepid:

"As we all know, RPGs are about story and character development and this is where *SII* falls flat on its face," wrote Gamefan magazine reviewer Eric Mylonas in 1999, giving it a 70/100. "While in no way is *Suikoden II* a stellar game or a major technological achievement, it is very fun to play and most RPG fanatics will enjoy the ride," wrote RPGFan.com's more positive reviewer, awarding it an 80.

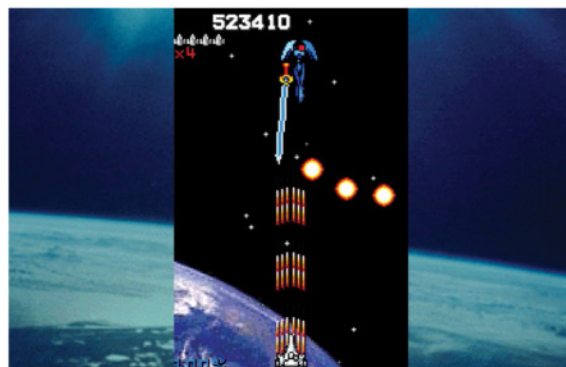
These mild takes were the perfect foundation for a true gaming legend. It wasn't until it was far too late, when all the English-language copies had been snapped up and resale prices had shot through the roof, that whispers started getting around and people finally realised what they'd missed – and how much it would now cost to correct their mistake. Fansite Suikosource has an entire forum category dedicated to buying the games, with topics going back decades. Owning *Suikoden II* took serious commitment and a lot of money.

Thanks to the HD remaster the game is easier to buy and play than it ever was when it was new, and the



Wins all around

Digital sales rarely have any impact on the second-hand values of desirable retro games. A rare original cart is still rare and original, after all. What re-releases actually do is allow everyone to join in on the fun, or take a chance on an obscurity they'd never heard of until it crossed their Steam home page.



FAR LEFT: Cheap digital releases make sharing the fun easier than ever.

LEFT: Four-figure values aren't unheard of for old imported shmups.

WALLET PLEASERS *Unmissable experiences no longer have to cost an arm and a leg*



NO HEIST REQUIRED
Ninja Five-O's mix of agile platforming and arcade-style absurdity is still a treasure – even without a high price tag.



FISHY BUSINESS
It's never been easier to give the weird world of *Umi-hara Kawase's* bouncy fishing line adventure a try.



SHMUPS ON SALE
Radiant Silvergun, the shmup everybody wanted but nobody could afford, is now just another game to throw in a cart.



BUNDLED UP
What's better than one great old game? Four of them. Especially when they're as cheap as *Castlevania Advance Collection*.

general mood is relief and gratitude. Comments focusing on the games themselves are almost universally positive. It's generally a happy ending for the sought-after RPG (even if the remaster still needs some work), its modern reception at a relatively high price echoing the years of positivity that came before it. The game is good, Clive's quest is still tripping people up, and people are passing around cooking contest tips like it's 1999.

CHEAP 'N' (UN)CHEERFUL

A quick check of some other equally wonderful rarities reveal similar happy sentiments. One Steam review of under-appreciated Hudson Soft action game *Ninja Five-O* review reads, "Finally, my favourite GBA game comes to steam, and I don't have to pay thousands for a copy," sadly not even a slight exaggeration of the cart's current resale price.

And *Umi-hara Kawase*, the first game in perhaps the world's only fish-themed puzzle-platforming series, is, "The most fun I've had raising my blood pressure," according to a Steam reviewer, with another declaring it "Harder than *Dark Souls*". Sometimes, being good and available is enough to see an older game through.

But not always. *Gimmick*, a NES platformer most famous for being expensive and releasing years after everyone stopped caring about NES platformers, received a more muddled response. Is it a masterpiece or some haggard relic of the past? Modern perspectives based on more affordable and readily available versions of the game notably skew negative.

Shmup *Judgement Silversword* received a more positive welcome to the modern era, although certainly not one that reflects the WonderSwan original's incredible scarcity and hyper-inflated prices. People like it when they play it. It's fine. A reasonable way to spend £4.29.

These muted compliments are as useful as enthusiastic praise, because they can only happen when these games are taken out of their exorbitant retro bubbles and given back to everyone. The pressure is off. Being fun (or annoying) for a bit can be enough now there are no carts to produce, ageing hardware to maintain, region locks to circumvent, or import charges to cover.

So what happens when games like these are released on Steam, without the (sometimes overbearing) guiding hand of historical context to declare them important and unmissable?

They get to be celebrated again. Played for the first time again.

Misunderstood again. Loathed again. Ordinary again. Recommended again.

Most importantly of all, they get to live again. Discussed and dissected online, old tips and tricks dusted off and passed on to grateful new fans. Ancient grumbles and frustrating sticking points can be validated by today's players – yes, that segment was stupid and unfair and you were right to turn it off and never touch the game again. Childhood hype can mature into detailed dissections of deeper themes, and friendly after-school rivalries revived as online speedrun sessions. You can't put a price on that. ■

Kerry Brunskill

THEY GET TO BE CELEBRATED AGAIN. PLAYED FOR THE FIRST TIME AGAIN

1 month



STELLAR BLADE

RELEASE June, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Shift Up Corporation

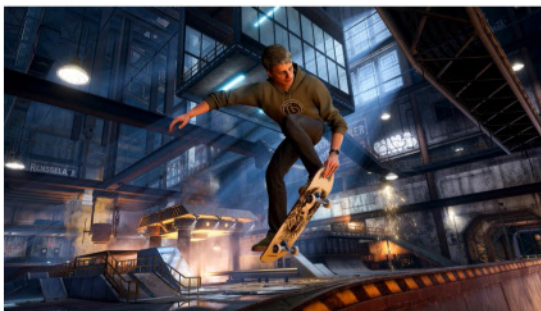
The stunning, adrenaline-inducing action-RPG that was a smash hit as PlayStation 5 exclusive gets ported to PC. Expect insane combat and giant bosses.



SYSTEM SHOCK 2: 25TH ANNIVERSARY

RELEASE June 26, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Nightdive Studios

Following its well-received *System Shock Remaster*, Nightdive Studios returns with an updated and upgraded version of the series' celebrated sequel. Shodan returns!



TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3 + 4

RELEASE July 11, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Iron Galaxy Studios

The now legendary skating sims return with more skaters, new skate parks, gnarlier tricks, fresh beats, cross-platform multiplayer and upgraded graphics.

2 months



METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

RELEASE August 28, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Konami

SNAKE returns in, arguably, his most memorable mission to date. And this time he looks better than ever thanks to a UE5 glow-up. Tense espionage action awaits.



MARATHON

RELEASE September 23, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Bungie

A new squad-based extraction shooter from the makers of the *Destiny* series where teams of three must work together to battle rival teams and hostile security forces.

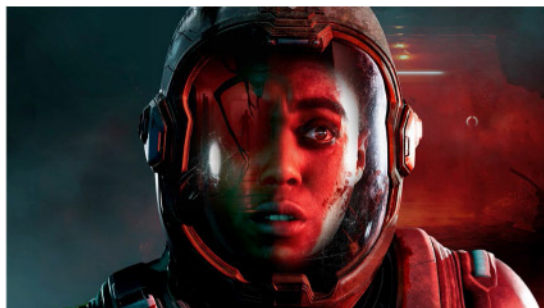


BORDERLANDS 4

RELEASE September 23, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox

The mayhem-fuelled looter-shooter returns with promises of billions of weapons, outrageous enemies, and intense co-op action. Here's hoping it's better than the movie!

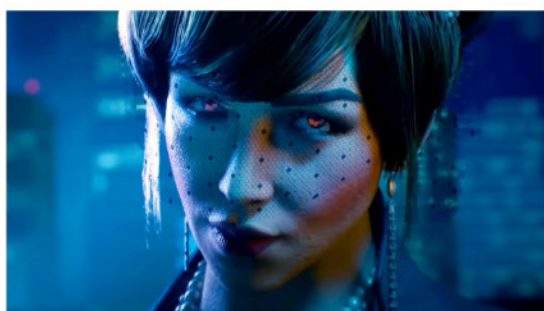
3 months



DIRECTIVE 8020

RELEASE October 2, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games

When a ship carrying humans crashes on an alien planet 12 light years from home, the crew must fight for their lives to survive. Tense survival action.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE October 2025 | **DEVELOPER** The Chinese Room

Fight your way through a modern-day Seattle on the brink of an open war as an elder vampire. The long-awaited first-person World of Darkness RPG is almost here. Hype!



DOUBLE DRAGON REVIVE

RELEASE October 23, 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Yuke's

The side-scrolling beat 'em up returns for more fisticuffs. Choose from a cast of four playable fighters, including the famous Lee brothers, and bring pain to your foes.

4 months+



JUDAS

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Ghost Story Games

The new narrative FPS from Ken Levine places you on a disintegrating starship. As the titular Judas, can you escape? And what deals will you make or break to do it?



CRIMSON DESERT

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Pearl Abyss

A gorgeous-looking open-world action adventure set in the same universe as MMO *Black Desert*. Adventure in the brutal continent of Pywel and forge your own destiny.



SPLITGATE 2

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** 1047 Games

If you wanted to know what would happen if you smashed *Unreal Tournament*, *Halo* and *Portal* together, then *Splitgate 2* answers that. Frenetic shooting action.

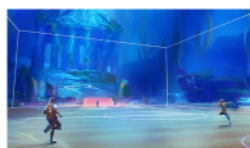
MOD

SHIELDED

If you're a fan of having a high armour class in *Baldur's Gate III*, but are tired of looking at the same old boring shields over and over again, then why not download the *Objects as Shields* mod? Of course you want a fish as a shield! Grab it here: tinyurl.com/yck89v8m







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 19

DEVELOPER
Slocap

PUBLISHER
Slocap, Keplar Interactive

LINK
playrematch.com

REMATCH

The beautiful game gets some extra kick

Every now and then a game comes along that seems unassuming at first but totally blows away all of your expectations and reveals itself to be something special. *Rematch* is one of those games. Yes, it's football, but it's far closer to the likes of *Rocket League* and *Overwatch* than it is to *FIFA*, and is all about action and teamwork.

Trailers really don't do this game justice. Watching people run around a pitch, even when extremely stylish, can't capture just how good this feels to play. A skilled, action-based team game, *Rematch* is the closest I've come to feeling like I'm actually playing a game of football thanks to how reactive and tight the gameplay is.

Instead of playing as a whole team like in *FIFA* and other football games, you control just one player in a team of 3-5 people to immerse yourself in the action. You need to run and react to every pass and tackle, and really work hard to aim your shots and score a goal. Even if you're not a fan of football the fast-paced drama of it all will win you over. *Rematch* captures that feel of bodily control and reaction, much like the combat of creator Slocap's previous game *Sifu* did, but this time you get to test it out with others on a football pitch.

I recently got to visit Slocap in Paris and talk to creative director Pierre Tarno about the game and see how the studio goes about capturing what it really feels

like to play football. "We want you to feel like an amazing athlete," Tarno tells me.

"We want players to feel the high-stakes pressure of football. We were trying to get to that core essence of at least part of what makes football so much fun and a beautiful sport," he continues. "It does feel like the game version of playing five-a-side. Way more than *FIFA* is a football game, but the experience is so disconnected from how it actually feels to play football – this actually feels more dead-on. The designer on the team was saying *FIFA* is a football simulation and *Rematch* is a football player simulation. Yeah, for sure *FIFA* is serious tactics, and it's actually pretty intricate in how you can order your team around and stuff like that. But in terms of what it feels like to be on the pitch yourself, this is closer to it." The development team has definitely captured that, keeping things reactive and at a steady 60fps to facilitate that was extremely important to them.

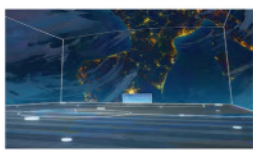
MATCH MAKER

The game will initially launch with four modes: 3v3, 4v4, 5v5 and a ranked 5v5 with other modes to be added in later seasons. Matches last about six minutes, but can spill into extra time and for now things are multiplayer only, with bots for solo play being worked towards for season 3 in 2026. You'll also be able to crossplay with consoles, so there will be no danger of running out of opponents or potential teammates. "For me, where the game strikes the best balance of action, engagement, and tactical gameplay is 5v5, and that's why I think it makes sense to have it as the main competitive game mode," Tarno adds. "But new game modes, even fun ones, if they're popular enough and deep enough could find their way into competitive queues. We're open to mixing things around."

I played a few rounds of 4v4 and 5v5 – the pitch changing sizes slightly to create more heated games when there are fewer players. I'm not typically a football or team-based game fan, but by my third match I was hooked. The simple act of connecting with the ball and making things happen feels amazing. Chasing it down after the

PLAYED
IT

THE ACT OF CONNECTING WITH THE BALL AND MAKING THINGS HAPPEN FEELS AMAZING



➤ opposing team fumbled a shot then passing it further upfield to line up a shot of my own made me feel like a hero just as much as getting in a few cheeky goals. I went from clueless to understanding and hunting down openings with ease thanks to a radar of the area keeping tabs on where players are, and an icon keeping track of the ball off-screen. I could always tell where I was in relation to the ball, and where I needed to put myself to intercept it.

Basic skills such as passing and positioning are great by themselves, and there's a handy button that lets teammates call out to you while showing a line to aim your kicks with a crosshair towards. As you get deeper into it you'll start picking up more techniques like overhead passes and volleys to really feel the depth of the action available to you. You'll also have a stamina bar that allows you to put on extra bursts of speed to really launch yourself into every charge and a short 'extra effort' opportunity to push yourself to the limit.

You can also change playing positions on the fly during a match – goalkeepers aren't static and are encouraged to step out of the penalty box to become a part of offensive pushes. If things start to go a bit wrong anyone can step in to play keeper too – it's down to whoever reaches the backend of the pitch first to take up the gloves. You'll be randomly assigned a spot at the start of each game, but you never have to stick to it – if someone else prefers to play in goal it's a very quick changeover, and means that no one has to feel left behind or pressured into any position.

Mimicking that pressure of team sports and excitement of matches was also a core pillar of Sloclap's design philosophy and it can be felt in both the gameplay and music. When in possession of the ball you're particularly vulnerable to having it stolen from you via tackles, so you'll need to try to push it ahead of you and keep passing to keep up that frenetic tempo.

To match that the music keeps a high beat, but fades at quieter moments and roars back during conflicts on the pitch or

attempts at goal to help keep your adrenaline up. By the end of my play session my palms were sweating and I was contemplating getting into the sport myself. A huge compliment from someone who is usually too lazy to get up off of the sofa to go to bed.

BRIGHT FUTURE

The drawback of online play, however, and a side effect of all that pressure is that people's 'passion' for the game might bubble over in unsavoury ways. So how is Sloclap aiming to reduce that? How will the team discourage people from trying to hog the ball and the glory?

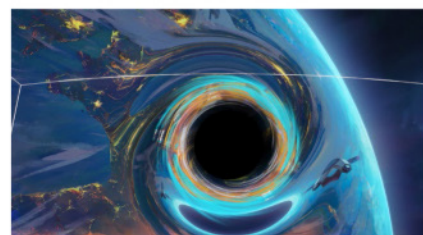
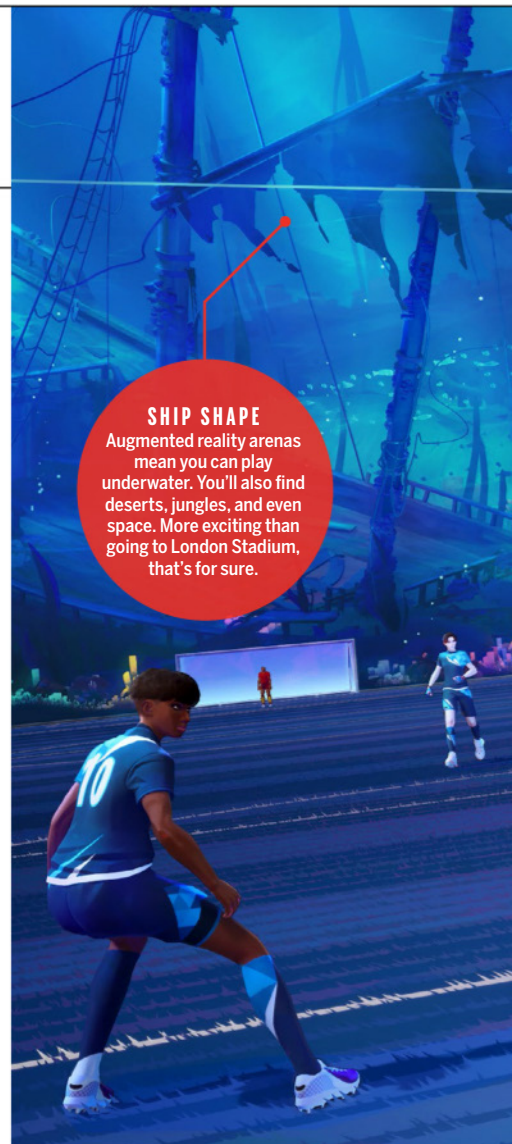
"I think team play comes from design," Tarno tells me. "The setting is colourful with impressionist influences – it's more of an optimistic future than a dystopian one. We have something that's colourful and cheerful and it's about the joy of playing with friends – I think that can help." While *Rematch* is all about the act of playing football, a lot of care and attention is placed in where you play it. The game is set in 2065 in a world that has embraced clean energy sources such as solar and wind farms, as well as diversity and fair play. It's a world free of any anxiety, where people just love to play and watch football. The art style is also incredibly bright, with only the slightest bit of exaggeration to characters to keep them feeling elegant and realistic while still being stylish.

While you'll be able to play in traditional stadiums, matches also take place within augmented-reality cages which can project fantastical backdrops to play in that change depending on who's winning. You'll find flocks of colourful parrots flying out when you score a goal in the rainforest, fish swimming around you underwater next to a shipwreck, and even playing in space next to the International Space Station isn't a stretch too far. Sloclap is hoping that all of that positivity and fun of the environments will affect how people feel when they play and lead to better cooperation, but that's not the only tool in the studio's arsenal.

"There's more of an advantage to defence than to offence," Tarno continues. "So vulnerability in possession is something that spontaneously generates team play. When we ran load tests we were playing games – solo queuing against randoms who didn't know each other – and they were passing the ball. It was one thing ➤

SHIP SHAPE

Augmented reality arenas mean you can play underwater. You'll also find deserts, jungles, and even space. More exciting than going to London Stadium, that's for sure.



WHEN IN POSSESSION OF THE BALL YOU'RE VULNERABLE TO HAVING IT STOLEN FROM YOU



FAR LEFT: You'll be able to customise your goal celebration.

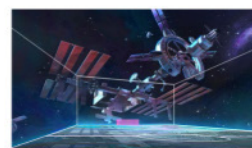
LEFT: You can add curve to a ball while shooting.

Rematch

RIGHT: You can change the style of your clothes as everyone on your team will be shown in the same colours.

BELOW: The arenas are gorgeous with special animations.





☹️ that really was a relief. Because I was a bit scared of every time somebody gets the ball, they try to be the hero and be the star of the show. But since it's a risk to dribble, and the winning strategy is to construct an action and a team play, what we saw is that there's actually quite naturally gravitate towards [team play]."

And if all that fails there's always mute and block options, and the developer will be monitoring grieving techniques. For example, Tarno mentions that a goalkeeper can't just catch and chuck a ball into their own goal to annoy other players – the game has a slight period of invulnerability to prevent that.

PLAY ON

It's amazing to visit the studio and see just how much care is being poured into every decision, including why the team has gone for a paid-for model when other team-based games are free-to-play. "I never considered free-to-play," Tarno says bluntly. "One of the things I love about making games is that there is no secret formula or anything, but the best way – or maybe actually the only way – to make a commercial success is to just make a very good game."

"One of our cultural pillars at Sloclap is respecting our players, respecting their intelligence, respecting their skills. We like challenging gameplay, and gamers are a very discerning audience. They are often very analytical, very precise in their assessment of mechanics and what works, what doesn't, what's balanced, what's not balanced etc. My point is, if you make a game that's good enough, that's unique enough – even if players say, 'Oh, it's an online game with a competitive edge, it should be free to play otherwise it's dead on arrival.' I think that's not true. I think that if it's original and solid, plus very reasonably priced, players will get it."

They're definitely delivering on that 'reasonably priced' part as you'll be able to grab a copy for £20.99 – half of the price of the likes of FIFA. Instead you'll be able to buy cosmetic items to spice up your look and some form of battle pass though we've yet to see what form that will take.

With its crosshair for aiming and quick

skirmishes for the ball, the influence of the likes of *Rocket League* and *Overwatch* are clear, so why has *Rematch* stayed so true to the sport rather than opting for a more outlandish approach?

"We had prototyped a wall run," Tarno admits. "That was the most over-the-top thing that we considered. We didn't do it because firstly, it was a big failure. It was functional, but it was a big failure. And production-wise it would have been a bit tight. But the main reason was that [using it] is actually almost impossible to set up. Like, to have your teammates be running exactly at the same time, to jump at the same time that the ball arrives to them. And so it could potentially have made sense at very, very high-level competitive play, but it strayed a little too far from the sort of credible fantasy that we were aiming for. And it was not interesting enough in terms of what it brought into gameplay to warrant the feature being developed."

That doesn't mean that oddball modes and manoeuvres are completely off the table, however, as the team is open to anything for future seasons. "We want *Rematch* to be a platform on which we can build a variety of experiences," Tarno tells me after musing on a few other ideas from the realistic (an offside rule) to the ridiculous (shrinking goals and more than one ball). "Our core gameplay can work within quite a large variety of gameplays. And the core pillars – feel like an amazing player, feel part of a team, feel the pressure – they can also be translated into quite a number of different experiences. So if one of them is popular enough, it might even find its way into competitive ranked gameplay."

Rematch feels like it has the potential to keep fans of both pure football and action happy. The focus on making movement feel good and being integral to a team means it has a strong base to build off of. Football fans will love how true the game feels to actually playing the sport, while those into action will enjoy how reactive it is. And with loads more modes coming on the horizon, it will be great watching which direction the team will go.

Clearly Sloclap is in this for the long haul with a lot of plans and thought going into future seasons before the game is even out. Sloclap has every right to be so optimistic – everything I saw and played of the game so far has me certain that this is going to be something special. Bring on the beautiful game.

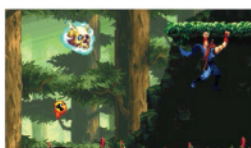
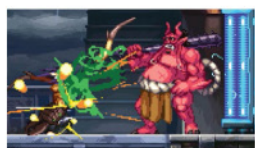
Daniella Lucas

**YOU'LL BE ABLE TO BUY
COSMETIC ITEMS TO SPICE
UP YOUR LOOK**



PREVIEW

Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
The Game Kitchen

PUBLISHER
Dotemu

LINK
tinyurl.com/5xb47m69

NINJA GAIDEN: RAGEBOUND

Take on a demon army in this slice of retro side-scroller action

As I played through the tutorial of *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound*, I started to feel a fear very specific to videogames. You know the one. “If I’m already struggling in the training level, what chance am I going to have in the rest of the game?” I know, I know, get all your games journalist jokes out of the way now. But I did have reason to be nervous with this one.

But the tools *Ragebound* gives you are as powerful as they are precise, and as my confidence with them grew, I found I was much more in control than I thought I was. A few hundred dead demons later, and I don’t think it’s quite as hard as you might expect – but it certainly is satisfying.

Like *Blasphemous*, *Ragebound* is a 2D side-scroller, and also like *Blasphemous* it’s gorgeous, though this time the pixel-art pops with colour instead of grimdarkness. You play Kenji Mozu, a disciple of usual series protagonist Ryu Hayabusa off on his own bloody quest concurrent with the first *Ninja Gaiden* game.

I won’t pretend to be au fait enough with the series to understand the significance of this narrative set-up, but I suspect the story isn’t what anyone’s here for anyway. What that premise mainly provides is a very good excuse for carving your way through countless enemy ninjas, samurai and monsters, and jumping over a lot of spiked pits.

It all feels much faster and more responsive than *Blasphemous*, and your strikes are more decisive. Most enemies

simply go down in one slash – the challenge comes in getting in close without taking a hit yourself, often dodging projectiles along the way.

Tougher enemies require a charged attack, but finding the seconds required to get one ready can be a big ask in busy combat encounters. The trick is to look out for enemies with glowing auras – slay one of those and you ready a charged attack instantly, though you need to use it quickly or lose it.

That means encounters aren’t just about clearing the room as fast as possible, they’re about efficient tactics. The best path through is often to kill enemies in a specific order, grabbing that free charged attack when you need it and then making sure it’s immediately deployed where it can do the most harm, instead of wasted on a lesser foe.

FEUDAL SPIRIT

After battling my way through a burning village and slaying a tough-as-nails fire demon boss, the preview build skips me ahead to a later section, after Kenji has somehow merged with a female ninja

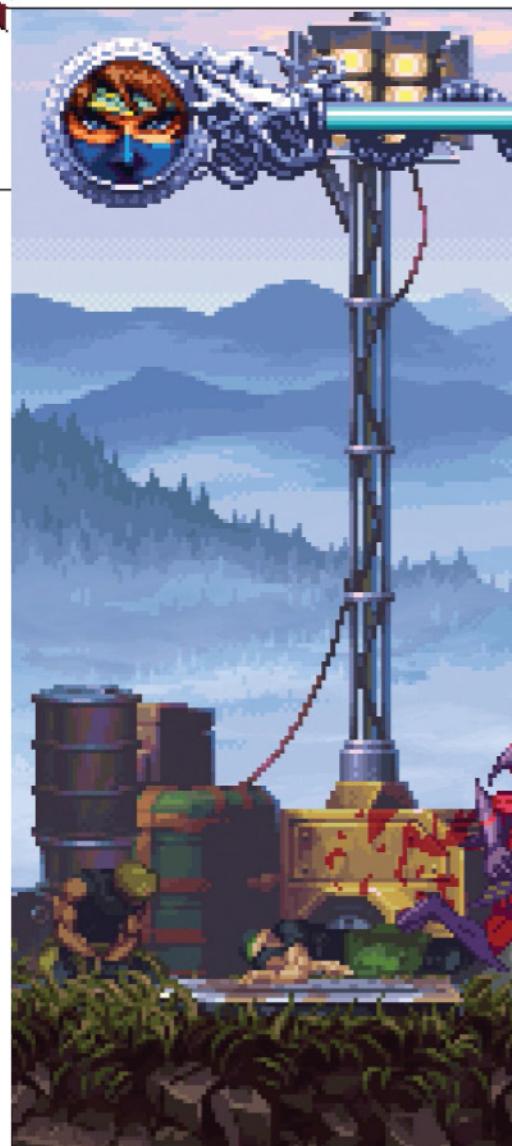
called Kumori. They’re a classic odd couple – she’s from the Black Spider clan, a rotten lot of ninjas that he’s honour-bound to oppose. But apart from letting him bicker with her ghostly manifestation, their synthesis has also gifted him with many of her abilities.

Certain points in each level also allow you to let Kumori take over for brief jaunts through a demonic dimension in order to unlock the path forward. These are essentially timed platforming levels, and they’re a great excuse to take the focus off fighting and onto the snappy movement controls for a bit. They’re no less precise and challenging, of course – particularly in sequences that require split-second use of her ability to throw a projectile and teleport to its destination.

It’s an exciting new side to developer The Game Kitchen. While I appreciated *Blasphemous*’ palpable atmosphere, I felt it was too slow and unfair to hook me. *Ragebound* feels very different – demanding without feeling punishing.

From the hour or so I’ve played, the result is shaping up to be a retro treat for anyone who loves the satisfying ‘shwick!’.

Robin Valentine



Expect to slay plenty of demons.



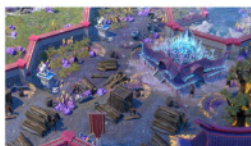
FEELS MUCH FASTER AND MORE RESPONSIVE THAN BLASPHEMOUS



ABOVE: Killing foes in a specific order is often a smart tactic.

LEFT: The action is fast and your strikes are lethally decisive.

Endless Legend 2



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Amplitude Studios

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

LINK
tinyurl.com/yc7aatnn

ENDLESS
LEGEND 2

A much-needed flight of fantasy for the 4X genre

Coral, coral, coral, as far as my mechanical eyes can see. I didn't know quite what to expect when building camps to claim territories and plonking down coral spreaders in my role as leader of a faction of part-mech, part-tendrilly oddities, but it certainly wasn't anything so drastic as half the world becoming carpeted in purple sprouting flora (or is it fauna?) in a matter of hours. As much as I'm in support of regrowing the reefs and so on, I can't help but feel that here on *Endless Legend 2*'s world of Saiadha I'm propagating some kind of fuchsia-coloured ecological disaster.

But from the perspective of the Aspects faction, this is a (ahem) core-al mechanic; it improves tile yields, heals my armies, and acts as a super-highway by letting units move faster across the map. The coral weaves towards water bodies where it spreads faster, and towards villages made up of wonderfully weird minor factions who might be eel-beings, dudes who fly around on giant owls, or vicious dark unicorns blustering for a fight. The coral automatically pacifies these factions, bringing you a step closer towards assimilating them into your empire. It's even a tool in diplomacy, where you can offer the benefits of coral to friendly factions who choose to embrace it.

True to the *Endless* series' philosophy of asymmetry, the great thing about all the above is that it's unique to that one faction, and that each of the game's six factions will offer different ways to play.

PLAYED
IT

FACTIONAL WARFARE

In the preview build, I also had a run as the Kin of Sheredyn: militaristic zealots who count fervour-fuelled iron giants among their ranks and build up 'zeal' when you improve cities' fortifications, which can then be used to issue commandments that range from creating divine populations in your cities to smiting enemy armies on the campaign map. The Kin could well be the most vanilla of *Endless Legend 2*'s six base-game factions, though that's not saying much in a series that lets you lead factions of plague insects, creepy faceless cultists, and fungus-spreading mushroom folk.

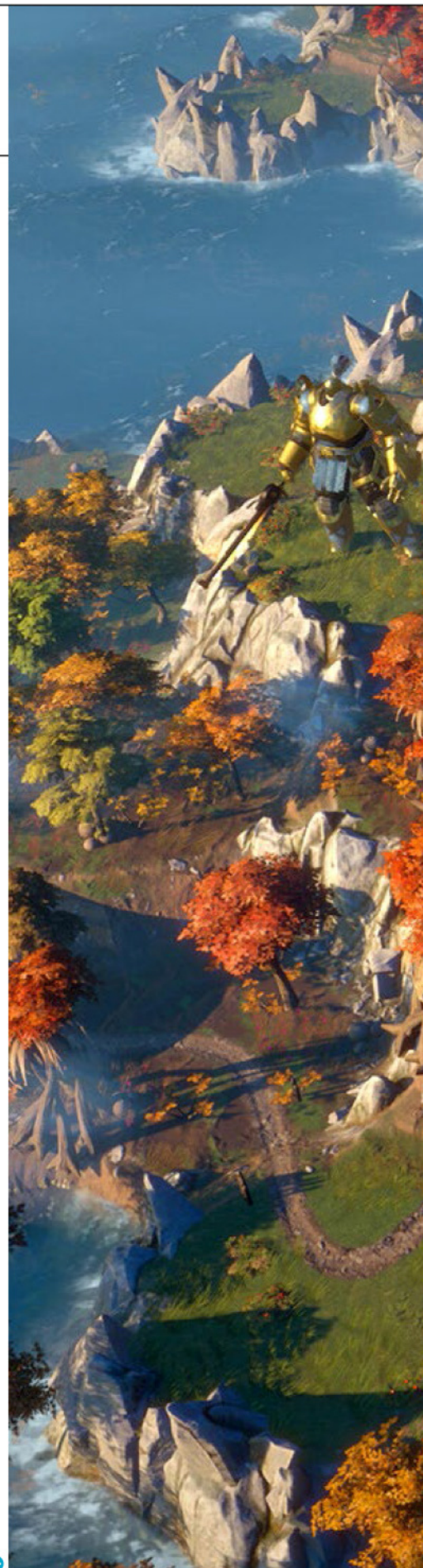
Of course, all this talk of new factions and their wild mechanics is more for series' fans, so let's rewind. At its core, *Endless Legend* (and now 2) is a 4X turn-based strategy game in which you build cities, research technologies, raise armies, and lock horns with other factions racing towards one of the multiple victory conditions for the game. In the case of *Endless Legend 2*, these victory conditions are your classic score and domination victories (yes, boring), but there are also seven as-yet unrevealed 'narrative' victory types.

This is a welcome change in direction from its predecessor, which had one 'Quest' (or narrative) victory amidst the usual make-the-numbers-go-up Economic, Diplomatic, Scientific yada-yada victories that have been the bedrock of 4X games for decades.

BUILT IT AND THEY'LL COME

Speaking of foundations, *Endless Legend 2* adds a few new twists to the original's excellent city-building. The sequel keeps much the same approach of letting you build sprawling cities across multiple tiles, but now you need to first build, yes, foundations in tiles adjacent to your existing city ones. Then you build your districts on top of those, and district-specific improvements within those.

An interesting new hook is that you first need to build a camp in a region to claim it. After that, you can expand the camp into a city using Influence, or you can spend less and attach it to an existing city instead. This then turns the camp into a ministry, which acts as a kind of secondary city centre for the existing city, >>

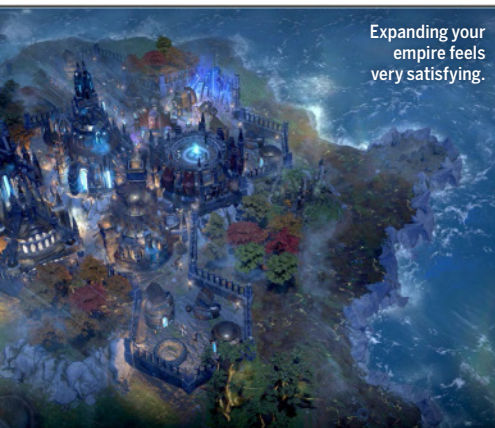
THE KIN COULD WELL BE
THE MOST VANILLA OF THE
SIX BASE-GAME FACTIONS



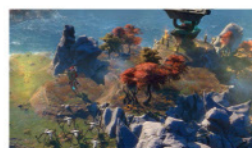
RIGHT: The game's cultural integration system lets different factions join you.

BELOW: There's depth to the battle system, even if enemy AI feels too easy right now.





Expanding your empire feels very satisfying.



letting you build new districts around it and funnel a whole new region's resources towards the existing city. In my time with the demo, I had two cities spread across three regions each where I'd previously have needed six cities, which is a neat way of keeping down the micromanagement while still giving you that satisfying sense of expanding your empire.

Endless Legend 2 is set on the world of Saiadha, a lush planet strewn, much like the original game's world of Auriga, with resources, ruins, and other remnants of the galaxy-spanning empire known as the Endless. And like Auriga, the world subjects you to extreme natural cycles that you'll have to adapt to.

Where Auriga was a dying planet steadily falling into an everlasting winter, Saiadha is shaped by an extreme planet-wide tidal cycle known as Tidefall. First the monsoons hit, causing minor factions to get more aggressive and unit visibility to decrease, but the real magic happens when the waters recede to reveal new lands, with more and more land getting revealed with each Tidefall cycle, keeping exploration at the forefront until much later in the game.

During my first Tidefall, the land within my territories expanded to reveal a precious deposit of Glassteel, as well as several previously submerged fortresses. Led by my hero archer, levelled up from skirmishes with demonic unicorns and kitted out with upgraded gear, I marched my armies there to take on the new threat. Like in the original game, battles take place on a dedicated battle screen. There's a decent level of depth here, with high ground, special tiles, deployable special abilities, adjacency bonuses and plenty of possible upgrades for your units.

AI GONE ROGUE

The problem at this early stage is that the AI's just not up to these battles. Fortress encounters are ostensibly tougher than your regular skirmish, yet I tore through each one like a Spartan dispersing an uprising. Yes, higher difficulty settings will load the numbers in the enemy's favour, but that won't make battles fun while the AI remains inept; of course, Amplitude has plenty of time to patch this up.

FORTRESS ENCOUNTERS ARE OSTENSIBLY TOUGHER THAN YOUR REGULAR SKIRMISH

Beyond that, there are loads of great touches here that remind me why I'm a fan of Amplitude's work, some of which carry over from the original game. There's the resource marketplace, for instance, with a proper supply-demand economy where individual resource prices go up and down depending on activity.

I also love *Endless Legend's* approach to cultural integration, where through bribery or diplomacy you bring disparate tribes under your wing and see that reflected in your social makeup. So I may be leading the Kin of Sheredyn, but on my empire's council I have Liara from a faction of courier centaur-elves known as the Consortium, while mighty owl-riders from Hoy and Ladhra have basically become the air force of my military.

Of the new stuff in *Endless Legend 2*, the personal relationships system looks promising, letting you nominate a friend and companion for your hero. Give them a companion, and suddenly two 'Havens' (see: love shacks) pop up randomly in your empire, which grant bonus yields. Your heroes will also make enemies over time, and even a 'nemesis', who will yield bonus rewards if beaten in battle.

None of this feels very fleshed out yet, but that's what Early Access is for; I'd love to see this stuff be affected by narrative events and choices or by fighting together in battle, with relationships between characters changing dynamically over time rather than you just nominating who's shacking up with who.

Above all, it's great to see Amplitude let loose again after its forays into history-spanning *Civilization* territory with *Humankind* (which was by no means a bad game, but whose real-world trappings inevitably restricted the studio's freedom to go creatively wild with world-building and storytelling). The sea-level concept of *Endless Legend 2's* new world already feels like a massive improvement over the drab winter one of its predecessor, while a focus on narrative victories and the seedling of a relationship system show signs that Amplitude is trying to do away with convention and find more ways to fit storytelling into the 4X framework.

At a time when developers in this venerable genre have become a bit bogged down in the whole etch-a-sketch human history-spanning theme, Amplitude's picked a great time to sweep us off once more to its singular sci-fantasy world, and from what I've played so far, it's going the right way about it.

Robert Zak



Fortress Denizens

PREVIEW

Stygian: Outer Gods



ABOVE: *Stygian's* frigid coastal village looks the part.

RIGHT: *Stygian's* few peaceful moments feature some beautifully detailed and lived-in rooms.



Stygian: Outer Gods



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Misterial Games

PUBLISHER
Fulqrum Publishing

LINK
misterial.com

STYGIAN: OUTER GODS

Feels too familiar to
work as cosmic horror

Can a work of cosmic horror still be successful if there's no unknowns left to fear? First-person survival horror romp *Stygian: Outer Gods* is superficially an impressive production for a smaller studio, but after playing through the current Early Access version, I feel like I've seen it all done before, and better elsewhere.

Set in a universe that can best be summarised as 'all of Lovecraft's stories put in a blender set to puree', *Outer Gods* casts players as a former soldier haunted by spooky dreams and setting off on an expedition to find out why a small coastal village has gone silent. The twist: it's not fishmen! It's witches. But they might as well just be zombies, given how they mostly just shamle slowly towards you, occasionally swinging an easily blocked sickle.

Above all, this game feels like it wants to follow in the footsteps of recent *Resident Evil* titles. Visually, credit where it's due, it pulls it off, with the crumbling hamlet being an impressively dense and detailed environment, with each dilapidated room feeling distinct. Most of the Early Access segment of the game takes place around these dense streets, full of crumbling houses, back-alleys, hidden loot caches and enemies. Aside from a couple of excursions to some nearby mine tunnels and a brief poke around the mansion overlooking the town, you'll be backtracking through it as key items gradually open up more routes.

WITCHES GET STITCHES

Unfortunately, there are only four enemy types in the game at present. Dogs (moderately dangerous but fragile), two kinds of humans, and crawling ghouls that are slightly tougher but only appear in the back half. Enemies don't respawn, and there's only a few dozen of them scattered around the entire map. It didn't take me long to get the hang of clearing them out, and I ended up in a ghost town of my own making, my inventory increasingly bloated with healing and crafting items but nothing to deplete them.

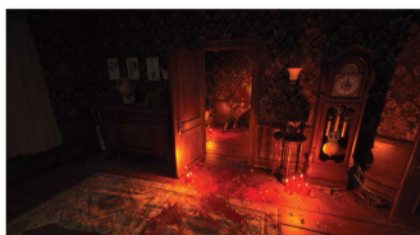
And without anything to fight, and no tension to build, I'm just left with the game's handful of simplistic puzzles and threadbare RPG systems to engage me. Those RPG elements in particular feel perfunctory, centred on a handful of perks you choose at character creation and during the adventure. The few non-murderous characters offer speech checks that a more talkative character could have used to get more info, but I chose to invest in lockpicking (letting you open treasure chests or bonus rooms) and the ability to shove around moderately sized barrels (usually positioned blocking side-passages), providing more resources than I could ever consume over its current three- to four-hour runtime.

Developer Misterial Games promises that choices will have consequences in the full game, but I can't see any altered finale being interesting enough to replay the whole thing from the top, given that most of my time was spent wandering empty rooms, easily swept clear of danger. Without some major rebalancing or structural reworks, I'm sceptical if there's enough here to support another three or four hours of play, let alone multiple trips through those all-too-lonely village streets.

My final concern is that even if everything does pan out well over the coming year of development, even existing *Stygian* fans are still likely to feel burnt by *Outer Gods*. The original game, *Reign Of The Old Ones*, was notoriously unfinished, abruptly ending on an awkward cliffhanger that seems unlikely to ever be resolved. And it's even less likely now, given that this new game – coming six years later – is a prequel.

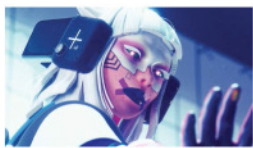
Dominic Tarason

**FEELS LIKE IT WANTS TO
FOLLOW IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
RECENT RESIDENT EVIL GAMES**



These wriggling roots block off passages early on, forcing further backtracking later.

PLAYED
IT



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 2025

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Bungie

LINK
tinyurl.com/y3v6xjfa

MARATHON

Bungie's new shooter looks great, but that might not be enough

Here's the easy part: *Marathon* is an extraction shooter in which crews of three runners race against the clock, using 3D-printed cybernetic bodies to strip resources from a mysteriously abandoned colony on Tau Ceti IV. In your way stand rival runners, robot forces left behind by the colony's owner, and even some local alien wildlife.

Before we get to the hurdles in *Marathon*'s way, let's break the gameplay down. Each trip to Tau Ceti IV lasts up to 25 minutes. At the beginning of a run you're given an exfiltration point to reach. Along the way you can choose to investigate any of the other points of interest on the map, taking on events like UESC incursions, solving simple puzzles, and even tackling what Bungie describes as boss encounters.

Objectives can be pinged for teammates, but how much risk you want to take is down to you. It's possible you snag a couple of decent bits of gear early and decide to book it to the exfil point, praying you don't get mugged by players along the way. At the other end of the spectrum, you might have already whittled down the number of competing crews and opt to harvest as much from the map as possible, leaving with a mammoth haul of weapons, credits, and consumables. The kicker is that each time you fail to extract, you lose all of your loot. *Marathon* doesn't tell you when you're the last team standing so, with imperfect map knowledge, the threat of encountering

PLAYED
IT

other players is a constant tension. My adrenaline spiked each time I heard a 'runner spotted' warning.

For the bold, it's possible to hijack another team's extraction by dashing into the circle at the last second. Downed players can also claw their way into its radius, provided the other team doesn't make a killshot, which makes for some rowdy after-action stories. Failure is baked into the genre's DNA, which I worry will see a lot of casual players bounce straight off. I can certainly confirm that a string of bad beats during the first day had me ready to tilt out of the solar system.

GUNS, GUNS, GUNS!

The second session went much better, in no small part because our crew was joined by a Bungie dev whose map knowledge and tactical nous helped deliver a run of Ws that was only interrupted when we wandered into an ambush by a crew of *Valorant* pros. On another occasion we lost a 1v3 to Bungie runner team lead Kevin Yanes. Hard to complain about either of those, even if we did lose the equivalent of a college fund in items.

Weaponry in *Marathon* is the expected range of sidearms, SMGs, shotties, assault rifles etc, albeit as imagined by a Lego designer in a PCP-fuelled revenge fantasy. As far as I could tell there was little in the way of alt fire modes or wacky options, with light machineguns and the railgun representing the heavier-hitting options. The one break from the norm are the battery operated 'volt' weapons, which fire energy charges. As for how they feel when fired, hey, it's a Bungie game: they feel great.

Marathon's base time to kill is punchy because the studio doesn't want players to win fights simply because they out-gear their opponents. If I get the drop on you, I need to be able to put you down even if you're rocking a purple tier shield. Still, it can feel oppressive when you're equipped with one of the poverty starter kits that the game hands you after a failed run, and you know you're up against runners with the net worth of Warren Buffett.

I expect that kind of power delta stuff to be extensively rebalanced based on player feedback from the alpha and beta tests. Likewise, I imagine there will be quite a bit of discourse about whether it's



MY ADRENALINE SPIKED EACH TIME I HEARD A 'RUNNER SPOTTED' WARNING



PREVIEW

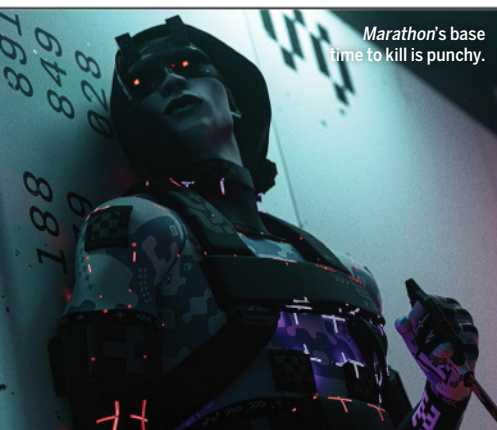
Marathon



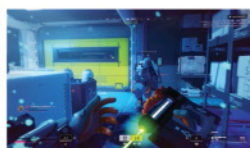
RIGHT: There will be six classes at launch. From what I played, Blackbird felt clutch.

BELOW: It's a Bungie game so, yeah, guns feel great to use.





Marathon's base time to kill is punchy.



easy enough to spot whether distant enemies are actual players or AI bots.

WALL HACKS FOR EVERYONE

I played four runners during my hands-on time, with a further two coming at launch. You can think of runners as akin to classes: each has a prime and tactical ability, plus two traits, making for distinct playstyles and consideration when it comes to team comp. In all our runs, having a Blackbird felt essential. Her Echo Pulse prime (ult) pings a large radius around her, highlighting enemies for teammates. Even cooler is her Interrogate trait, which enables you to perform a finisher on a wounded runner that simultaneously reveals the location of their remaining crew.

Glitch is the high mobility option that will feel most familiar to *Destiny* veterans, while Locus is your generic beefcake whose shield tactical and damage-focused prime make him a strong, if somewhat boring, choice.

The focus on three-player crews encourages a pleasing tactical flow. If one player is downed, another can handle the revive, while the third provides cover. It also creates the potential for simple positional strategy. One of the more skilled teams in our session ran two aggressive attackers with their final player hanging back with precision weapons to make easy picks during the skirmish. Clearly, map knowledge will be a major determinant in *Marathon's* skill ceiling.

Two maps were available in our test, both of which will be included in the alpha. Perimeter is a mid-sized map designed for five crews, while Dire Marsh is a more open map with six crews in mind. They will be joined at launch by Outpost, a more claustrophobic, indoorsy map that will end up hosting either three or four crews.

Intriguingly, there is one more map we haven't seen, but it isn't set to arrive until a couple of weeks after launch. The UESC Marathon is the titular vessel hanging in low orbit, which Bungie is billing as the hardest map. So why hold it back? Some of the content creators at the hands-on event have played older versions of it, and although they're locked into NDAs about the specifics, they seem genuinely

convinced that the map is a game changer. There was even breathless talk that it could have the same energising effect on *Marathon* that the Vault of Glass raid had on vanilla *Destiny*. Heady stuff.

I pressed Bungie for hints about what makes UESC *Marathon* different from the other maps, and was told by game director Joe Ziegler that it has "other vectors of pressure". Somewhat less obscurely, he said there are objectives which lead to puzzles, "raid-like mechanisms" and different "gameplay stressors". To which I say: aliens.

On the surface of Tau Ceti IV, you will encounter extraterrestrials in the form of red ticks. They're easily dispatched, and sometimes you'll need to destroy their nests in order to complete a contract for a faction. Earning rep from factions unlocks their perks, like being able to buy a specific item from the game's black market.

As with other extraction shooters, your loot and faction perk progress will be wiped at the end of each season, which are expected to last three months. In addition to new story stuff, there will be the usual gamut of weapons, components and mods added. I wasn't lucky enough to find one, but gold-tier rarity mods exist that substantially change the performance of specific guns.

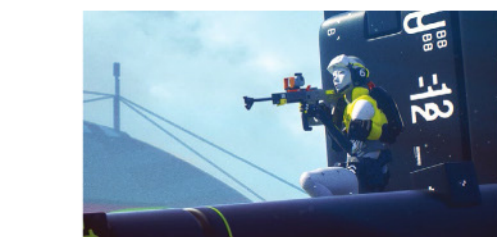
New seasons will also bring additional runners, and inevitably cosmetics, although it sounds like maps will be relatively rare – probably only one or two a year. Which brings us to perhaps the biggest issue facing *Marathon*: price. So far Bungie hasn't confirmed how much *Marathon* will cost, only saying it will be a premium product.

The question remains: will the extraction shooter genre, which feels inherently designed to generate as much stress as it does happiness, ever be mainstream enough to support the kind of success Bungie and Sony need to fund a game with the high production values *Marathon* has?

One thing I am certain of is that Sony will need some patience. Even if the game blows up on Twitch, it's hard to imagine *Marathon* will bottle lightning quite like *Helldivers 2* did. The genre is too hardcore to have that sort of mainstream success. Before playing *Marathon*, I had doubts about whether, even as someone with so much time in *Destiny 2*, I would enjoy the high-stress setting on an extraction shooter. But I left the session wishing I could log back on for another run.

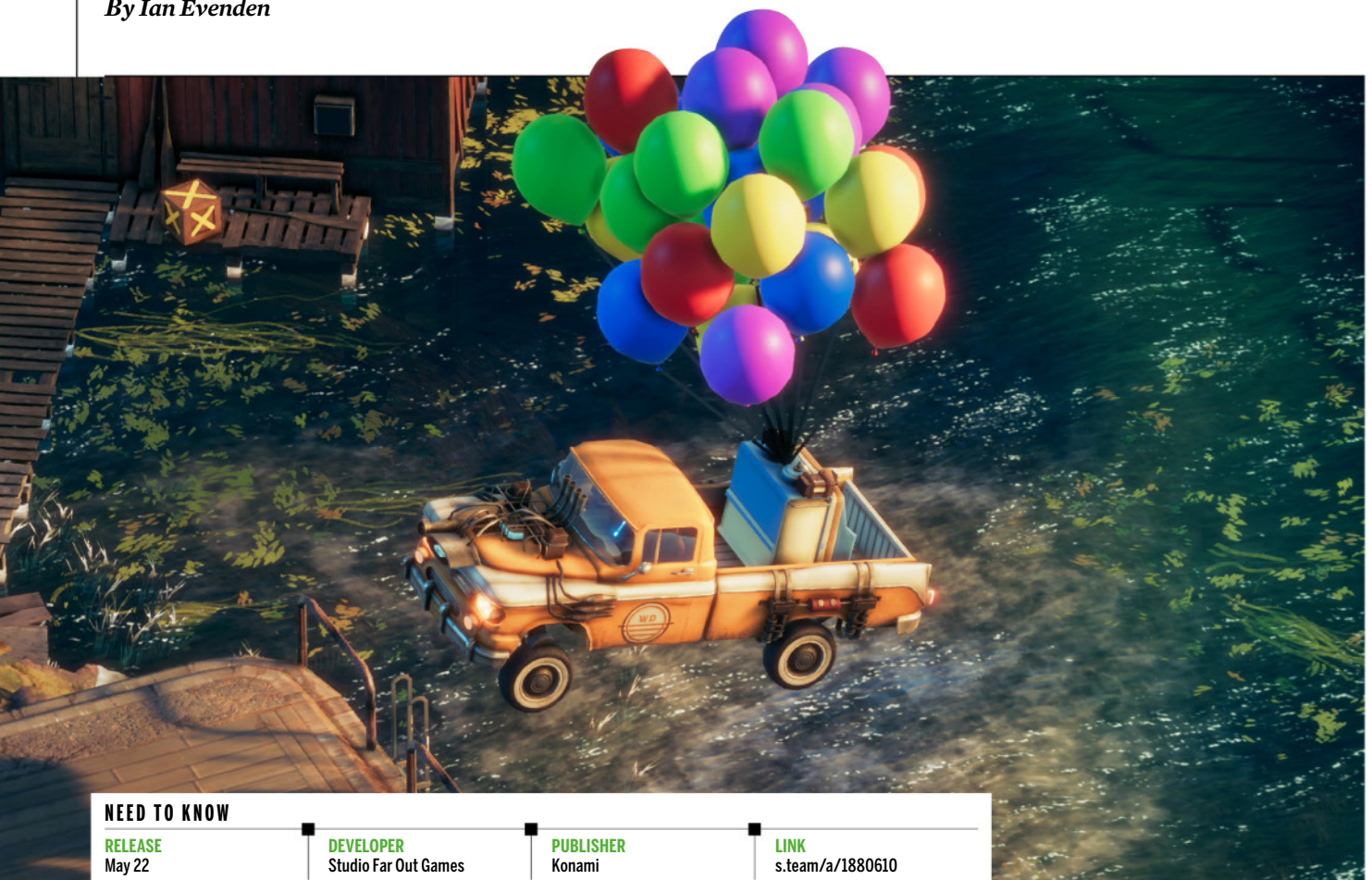
Tim Clark

TWO MAPS WERE AVAILABLE IN OUR TEST, BOTH WILL BE INCLUDED IN THE ALPHA



PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 22

DEVELOPER
Studio Far Out Games

PUBLISHER
Konami

LINK
s.team/a/1880610

DELIVER AT ALL COSTS

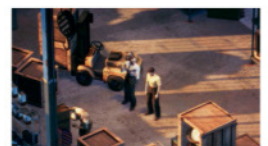
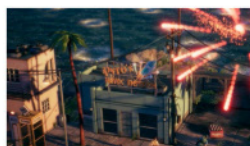
The game *Death Stranding* could never be

Deliver at *All Costs* is not the game you think it is. It actually opens almost like a *Fallout*, with an aspiring rocket scientist in a 1950s town getting up and starting his day with a letter from his landlord that threatens to evict him. He sticks it onto his fridge with the others...

PLAYED IT

Rather than the town being blown to bits in a nuclear fireball, however, Winston goes out and gets a job as a delivery driver, taking his neighbour's car and ploughing his way through traffic in one of the bounciest handling models outside of a *Grand Theft Auto* game.

The environment is fully destructible, so when he sets off backwards out of his parking space, the building behind him collapses while the car itself appears unharmed. The only thing that seems to actually damage it is complete immersion in a lake or river, which is surprisingly easy to do if you're even slightly off-line when



approaching a bridge. Having got himself a job at a courier company through battling his blue eyes at the CEO and talking about his boyhood on a farm, Winston is given a truck and sent off on his first job. It's a simple collect and deliver mission, but the load he's carrying turns out to be a huge pallet of fireworks, which begin to go off as they're loaded into the back.

COURIER BOLD

Driving around a tropical city (the game is set on an island and parrots often fly across the screen, while palm trees provide plenty of opportunities to crash) with fireworks flying everywhere, marking you out as very much the root of the problem, seems to make the city-dwellers angry. Not only does

Winston now have to deal with a truck that will only drive in a straight line under very limited conditions, but pedestrians are now pulling him out of his cab to express their displeasure. When he's not running them over, that is, in the kind of carnage that gets you a five-star wanted level in other games. The tyres are also pretty soon gone from his truck, and he's expected to get out and fix them, running the gauntlet of explosions, angry locals, and being run over himself. Eventually, one big explosion ends the mission, sending Winston back to the start.

It's pretty clear from the demo that, if you can master the steering, *Deliver at All Costs* offers utter mayhem as you transport inappropriate cargo across a city that's not built for high-speed traffic. Later missions involve delivering giant swordfish (very much alive), balloons that make the truck float, and leaky oil canisters that turn the roads into burning rivers of death. It's great stuff, and I hope it can keep up the momentum throughout the full game when it releases in May.

A TRUCK THAT WILL ONLY DRIVE IN A STRAIGHT LINE UNDER LIMITED CONDITIONS



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
The Game Bakers

PUBLISHER
The Game Bakers

LINK
s.team/a/1588550

CAIRN

Bend your legs at improbable angles to get to the top

I've never climbed a mountain, but having played *Cairn* I now feel like I have, even more so than after *Jusant* or *The Climb*. *Cairn*'s control system is brilliant, and perfectly judged, while its cel-shaded graphics capture the majesty of the mountains while looking a little like a *Zelda* game, too.

Cairn doesn't just point you at a rock and let you run at it while holding a button, à la *Assassin's Creed*. Instead, it gives you control over individual limbs – automatically selected from the traditional four, though there is a mode in which you make the choice yourself – and you position the foot or hand on the end on an appropriate handheld. The UI melts away – there's no stamina bar to tell you you're about to fall – and you have a limited number of pitons that effectively allow you to save your progress up a slope (and which are retrieved by a flying drone once you've reached the top).

MOUNTAIN GOAT

So you have to read the rock, plan your route from the bottom, hope you don't

get into too much trouble, and listen to the climber's pants and grunts and shivers to tell you when she's about to fall off. You can do some unpleasant things with her legs, crossing them over and pushing them out to the sides, so that it looks like you're imitating a spider climbing up the spout again, but when things come together and a flow state asserts itself, the top of a climb that seemed impossible the first three times appears surprisingly quickly.

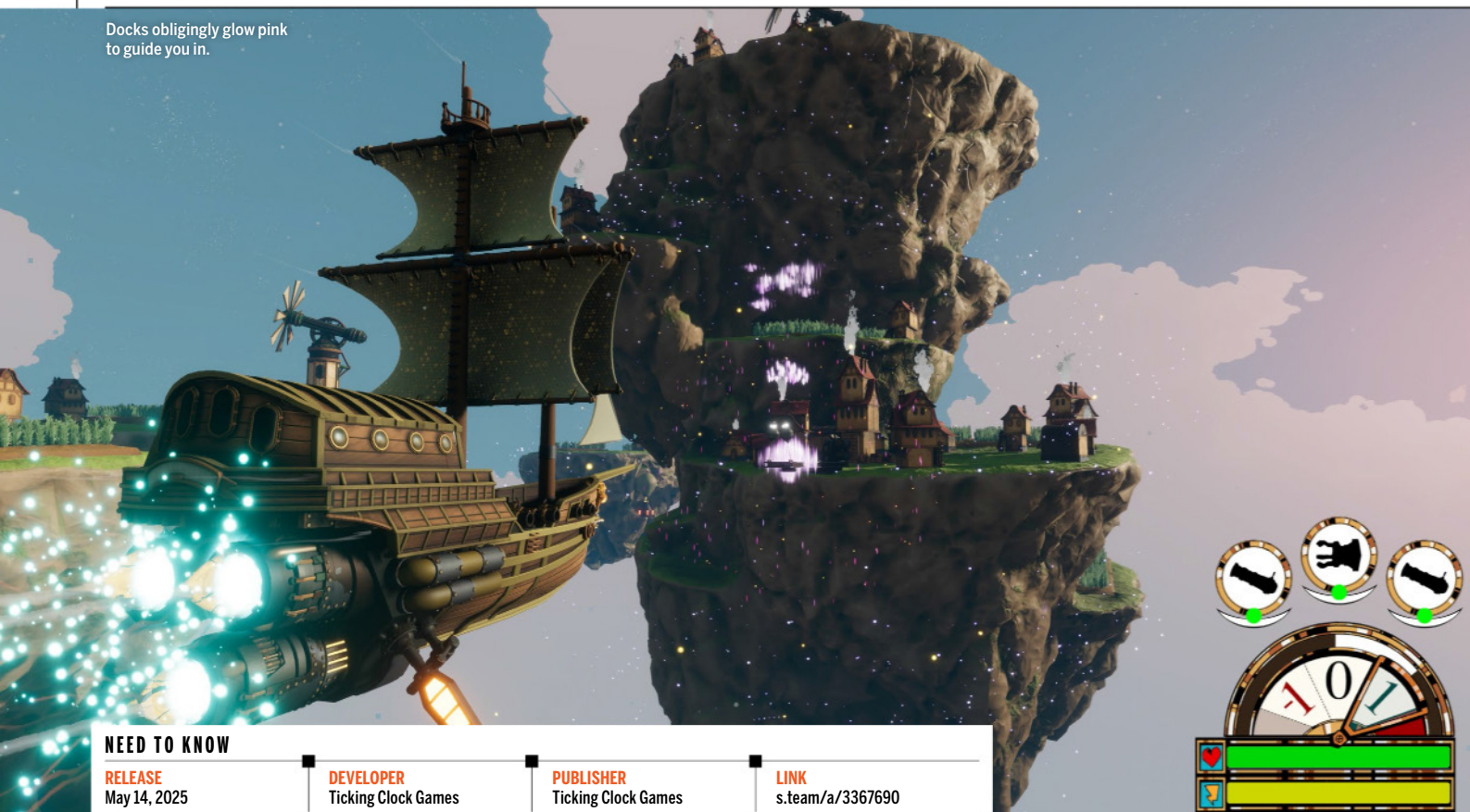
PLAYED IT

New routes naturally suggest themselves as you progress, and if you're wise in your placement of pitons you'll be able to try them out, making the climb even longer. It's a slow-moving game, a case of ensuring you're in the right position in four different places before attempting to move upward, but this just increases the satisfaction when your climber hauls herself over the ledge. This control system applied to a full game could be a wonderful thing.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Docks obligingly glow pink to guide you in.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 14, 2025

DEVELOPER
Ticking Clock Games

PUBLISHER
Ticking Clock Games

LINK
s.team/a/3367690

VOID SAILS

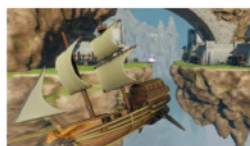
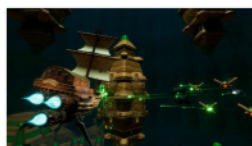
This mysterious sky-sailing adventure is looking shipshape

There's more than a hint of *Fallen London* about the situation your ship captain finds himself in in *Void Sails*. Rather than navigating the Sunless Sea, however, you're plying your trade between floating islands, your solar-powered ship capable of a few tricks to help you on your way.

PLAYED IT

The demo begins with an origin story. The captain summoned to his ship by the mysterious Man in Yellow is the scholarly sort, prepared for his adventures by a lifetime spent with books, and the owner of an enchanted pair of gloves. He's hoping to track down his missing father, but is immediately accosted by the ship's first mate, a chatty sort, and is required to show some sign of suitability for the job.

Luckily, our captain is perceptive, and soon figures out that the ship's sails capture solar energy, which they can divert to engines, cannons or shields.



Despite looking like a 16th-century ocean-going vessel, the ship cuts through the air between islands with speed and grace, especially once the captain works out how the boost works. Not only does this speed the ship up in a straight line, but it turns much more tightly too – until you run out of juice.

MASTER AND COMMANDER

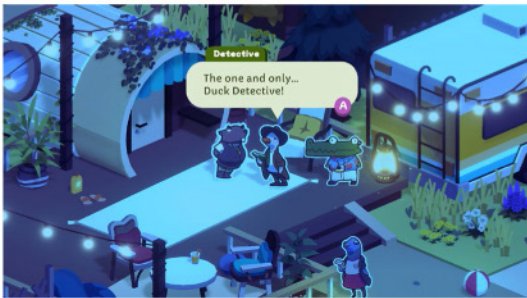
Energy management is an important part of the voyage, and if you enter a cave you'll have to deal with energy levels that don't regenerate as fast. Our captain soon docks at the nearest town in search of a travel permit to explore further. He gets embroiled in an argument over a lost ring, fails a skill check even though he calls upon the

power of his gloves, and ends up searching some nearby mines for the missing jewellery. Luckily, an upgrade station near the mine entrance sells him parts for his cannons and shields, ensuring he's well-prepared.

Inside the mine, he discovers mysterious footprints, and upon rounding a corner is attacked by the gun turrets someone's installed. Combat in the flying ship means zooming into a first-person firing view, trying to line up broadsides while accounting for the way your cannonballs will drop with distance. It may look like you're shooting over your targets' heads, but get it right and you'll be rewarded with a satisfying explosion. The ring is returned.

Back at the castle, still trying to get his travel permit, our captain is attacked by mysterious ships. The castle's lieutenant is impressed by the crew's defence, shooting three marauders out of the sky, and hands over the permit, even though she's acting a little shifty about the whole thing. Turn left at the lighthouse, she tells us, and the world is yours to explore.

OUR CAPTAIN SOON FIGURES OUT THAT THE SAILS CAPTURE SOLAR ENERGY



DUCK DETECTIVE: THE GHOST OF GLAMPING

The canard crime-solver returns to quack more cases

out of his filthy apartment and is worrying about his ex not responding to his messages. "She might be in danger!" growls the hard-boiled voiceover, and you're immediately set to work making deductions about why this might be. To the level of stalking, you might say, though frankly she sounds exactly as stuck up as you'd expect a talking swan to be.

Eugene now lives in a junk-filled flat with his sidekick Freddy, who likes to spring surprise trips on him (and who has salami on top of his fridge), and the pair soon end up at a dysfunctional campsite populated by suspicious characters. The game's charming 2D cutouts, clue-based

FIRST
LOOK

reasoning and absurd animals with issues and secrets are all back, and pressing Q lets you quack at any time. Absolute winner.

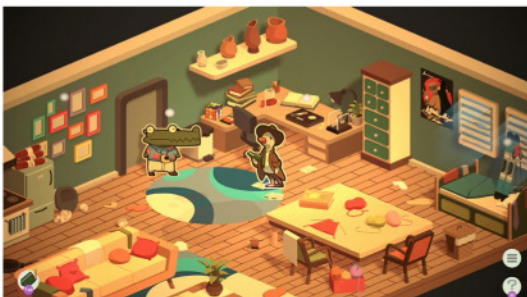
The first *Duck Detective* game was a lot of fun, as your trench-coated gumshoe wrestled with a salami-based conspiracy while trying to navigate post-divorce life and deal with a serious bread habit. In *The Ghost of Glamping*, he's being kicked

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Happy Broccoli Games

PUBLISHER
Happy Broccoli Games

LINK
s.team/a/2714620



A GENTLEMAN'S DISPUTE

I say chaps, let's have a big fight

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Blast Furnace Games

PUBLISHER
Blast Furnace Games

LINK
s.team/a/3106770

Slapstick humour is sadly underused in PC gaming, but *A Gentleman's Dispute* brings the art of hoofing your opponent over a

house roaring back. Alternatively, whack them with a baseball bat and get them eaten by a shark. There's something decidedly ungentlemanly

about *A Gentleman's Dispute*, though the luxurious Victorian moustaches of the participants in this battle royale add some class.



FREE MONTHLY UPDATES

PLAYRUST.COM





AND 2025 IS JUST GETTING STARTED...



Celebrating a decade of monster slaying in
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

By Joshua Wolens

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

Around 20 years ago, CD Projekt founders Marcin Iwiński and Michał Kiciński flew to meet the men they hoped to dethrone – the ‘BioWare doctors’ Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk. Accompanying them was Adam Badowski, today the joint-CEO of CD Projekt RED, who had the task of wowing the then-undisputed kings of RPG-making with a demo for *The Witcher* that the CDP leadership had tucked under its arm.

“This demo wasn’t great,” recalls Badowski in 2025, but back then it didn’t matter in the slightest. CD Projekt had the bulletproof confidence of youth on its side. “Ray and Greg, they asked the question. ‘So, what do you want to achieve?’” Well, wasn’t the answer obvious? “We would like to be the biggest, the best RPG team in the industry,” Badowski remembers answering. “We would like to create the best RPG game ever.”

“So how big is your team?” asked Muzyka and Zeschuk. “Right now it’s 15,” replied the gaggle of *Witcher* devs, “but we’re gonna have about 35 people”. The doctors shook their hands and said “We’ll call you back.”

THE WITCHER 2 MARKED THE DEBUT OF THE STUDIO’S OWN REDENGINE

MAKING HISTORY

A decade later, CD Projekt RED’s mad zeal had borne fruit. The studio was a phenomenon, and now people flew to visit it for advice (though the good doctors, ever supportive, did end up helping out the fledgling studio with the first *Witcher*, which ran on BioWare’s own Aurora engine).

It was, of course, all thanks to *The Witcher 3*, now the flagship of an enormous global franchise. CDPR had made good on its declaration in BioWare’s office: its head now hung heavy beneath the RPG crown.

But if the game was always fated to be a studio-altering success, you sure couldn’t tell from the start. The earliest days, when *The Witcher 3* was first scrawled on an office whiteboard, coincided with the apocalyptic collapse

of the 2008 financial crisis. “That was a very tricky period for the company,” says CDPR’s other joint-CEO Michał Nowakowski. “We’re like, making sure we have the money to pay people their salaries, and making sure we make good with everybody we owe money to. The early days were quite – for me – focused on, ‘How do we escape annihilation?’”

The answer? *The Witcher 2*, which CDPR got out the door in 2011 and then put on Xbox a year later. The game marked the debut of the studio’s own REDengine, and was barely comparable to the charming clunk of its predecessor: it was sleek, it was gorgeous, it was cinematic, and it was – in a characteristic fit of ambition for the studio – peanuts compared to the vision CDPR already had in mind for *The Witcher 3*, which would do all of that, but even better, and in an enormous open world this time. Had the studio made an open-world game before? No.

This was still a company flush with youthful confidence, sometimes literally. “This was my first job in game dev,” says Kajetan Kapuscinski, who joined CDPR in 2013 as an intern before graduating to become its first official cinematic designer, “and actually, I think I wasn’t the only one. This team was constructed from people who were just after [their] first game

– like they made one game or maybe two games in the industry, and there were a lot of us who were aiming for the stars.”

It’s that combination of optimism, determination, and maybe a touch of naivete that eventually put out one of the greatest RPGs of all time. “We didn’t know exactly how it’s going to be done,” recalls Kapuscinski, “and maybe this lack of knowledge was kind of a blessing at this point, because the scale of the game, trying to make an open-world game, created new challenges that we couldn’t have imagined beforehand”.

Those challenges erupted across every inch of development, from cinematics to narrative to quest design, all the way up to CDPR’s discussions with game industry suits about





ROUGH START

Work on *The Witcher 3* started right after the 2008 financial crisis. "How do we escape annihilation?" was CDPR's order of the day.



SMALL FRY

The Witcher deliberately ditched huge bosses after the second game, except for the griffin. That one's a special treat.

**CRIT
BUILD**

Adam Badowski didn't know *The Witcher 3* would be a massive hit; the studio's goal was just to hit 90+ on Metacritic. "That was our mantra."



HAG ON A SEC

Lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuk's favourite monster? The water hag. "It's Baba Yaga!"



**EASTERN
PROMISE**

"I loved working on monsters," says Mielniczuk. "The more Slavic they could be, [the better]."

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

marketing and distribution. Badowski himself opened a can of worms at one point by pointing out that, since the game had a whole lot of water in it, someone was going to have get Geralt to swim.

"I asked a very difficult question, 'There's water, where's swimming?' The whole room was quiet. People, they thought that we needed to cut something so we don't need to have swimming. If there's water, there's swimming, if there's swimming, there's diving, if there's diving, you have to build new locations."

Quite an ordeal, given CDPR already had to conjure new teams and departments to deal with the demands of filling *The Witcher 3's* already-existing and moisture-free world with stuff to do, a process that was endless.

"When we sort of felt like we finished, we played the game," says *Witcher 3* quest designer Błażej Augustynek, "and I remember, I think it was someone from the board saying, 'Yeah, this plays great, but the world is empty.

There's nothing but quests.'" While CDPR could make its previous games feel full to bursting with nothing but side-quests, trying the same thing with *The Witcher 3* left the map feeling barren. "It turns out that, in an open world, you have to have other stuff." So CDPR threw together a "little strike team" of devs to fill its world with (Augustynek grimaces at using the 'C' word) "meaningful content" much of which took the form of the question marks scattered across the world map.

It was smoother sailing when it came to the game's narrative; CDPR's area of expertise and – per Badowski – its number one priority. "It was pretty easy when it comes to story development," says lead writer, Marcin Blacha, "to those assumptions that it's about fatherhood, it's about looking for Ciri".

"The biggest changes were probably regarding the Wild Hunt," says Blacha. "All the time we had this fear that maybe the game is not big enough," which meant that, "initially the game was much bigger". When the studio realised the game was plenty

big enough, Blacha and co realised, "We needed to get rid of some content, and usually it was content regarding the Wild Hunt." Which is why we never got a quest that would have seen Geralt go undercover as a rider of the Hunt – it got left on the cutting room floor.

But mostly, translating CDPR's hallmarks to an open world was a process of ambition running headfirst into an obstacle, and remarkably talented people having to invent themselves around it. "I remember this conversation with one of the programmers," sums up Kapuscinski, recalling his efforts to zhuzh up the game's conversations and cutscenes. "I was asking, 'OK, could I make Geralt, you know, move two steps to the right?' and he was like, 'No, it's not

possible'. That's where we started... issue after issue, topic after topic, we were discovering how to make it possible."

The problems kept coming. How do you set up monster hunt contracts when players might just happen across

their quarry and slaughter it without even accepting the quest? How do you tell the story of a dungeon when they might accidentally stumble in through its secret exit and read all your carefully placed notes backwards? Two, three, or four quests might all influence one another in subtle ways, but devs had no guarantee of the order people would encounter them in.

Harsh reality never stopped rearing its ugly head, and it was often young devs freestyling ways around it, whether that's Kapuscinski as the studio's first cinematic designer or Miles Tost (now CDPR's level design lead), who came on board as "the second level designer to ever join the company. I spent my first days at CDPR planning Skellige, from the background mood to where individual villages and all that were placed. Surprisingly, much of that actually made it into the final game."

It was in all quarters a development process heavy on invention and improvisation, even down to the casting of Charles Dance as Nilfgaardian emperor Emhyr var

TRANSLATING CDPR'S HALLMARKS TO AN OPEN WORLD WAS A PROCESS OF AMBITION



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

Emreis. “There was a point during the development and promotion process when we put a countdown up on our website,” says Borys Pugacz-Muraszkiewicz, English adaptation director. “I don’t remember, actually, the nature of the announcement we were going to make, but we had the countdown on the website and then we decided not to make the announcement.”

This was, all told, a little awkward, because now CDPR had a live countdown to an announcement, but no actual announcement. So someone, “came up with the idea that we should just enlist a top actor and, when the clock runs down, announce them as the big reveal”. The studio pulled on a biz-dev team member’s contacts in the “talent management world” to quickly recruit Charles Dance and his clout-heavy name and, hey presto, *The Witcher 3*’s devs – sweat beading on their foreheads – had an announcement to make.

So maybe you can’t fault execs too harshly for regarding the game’s free-jazz approach to development a little sceptically before launch. While the devs were in the open-world trenches, CDPR’s business team was on a whirlwind tour of chats with distributors, retailers, even manufacturing plants, trying to summon excitement and ink deals for the game ahead of release.

One trip in particular was emblematic of the response the studio got in most of those talks. “We were in Bentonville, Arkansas – the HQ of Walmart,” remembers Nowakowski, “and [a Walmart exec] said, ‘I like you guys, but it’s just not gonna happen. You guys are not Bethesda. You don’t have a history of games like that.’”

Nowakowski made him a bet: “If we sell well, I’m gonna fly over to Arkansas, and [you’re] gonna buy me dinner.” He’s still waiting on dinner.

THE LAUNCH

“I felt like a rock star,” says *Witcher 3* quest designer Joanna Radomska, about the immediate aftermath of the game’s release in May 2015. “Like, my grandma was calling me: ‘They talked about your game – you!’ – in the news, on the TV, or in the newspaper.”

CDPR had done it. Through all the unexpected challenges, mad scrambles, and unmasked scepticism, the studio had produced a masterpiece: an open world that managed to put narrative first and deliver on it too.

“MY GRANDMA WAS CALLING ME: ‘THEY TALKED ABOUT YOUR GAME ON THE TV!’”

**FLASH DANCE**

Casting Charles Dance as Emperor Emhyr was a Hail Mary by the studio, which needed an announcement for the end of a web countdown.

**EXPANSIONS***Blood, wine, an unorthodox gardener*

HEARTS OF STONE
Releasing just a few months after the main game came out, *Hearts of Stone* pits

Geralt against a foe who is pretty much Lucifer. *The Witcher 3*’s lead writer Marcin Blacha reckons the DLC is “a little bit underrated” and I agree, if only because its boss fight against a faceless ‘Caretaker’ – who lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuks calls “straight out of *Bloodborne*” – is the best in the game.



BLOOD AND WINE
The Witcher 3’s second, meatier DLC came out a year after the main game, and

sends Geralt off to fantasy-France to trifle with vampires and buy a vineyard (he’s earned it). The idea for it was pitched to big boss Adam Badowski by Blazej Augustynek, who initially thought it would get sent “straight to the trash”. Little did he know Wine Club Geralt was exactly what we all wanted.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

"We had super-ambitious goals that we were gonna sell like, maybe six million units, which we ended up achieving in, I think, about a quarter," says Nowakowski.

Two years after release, it was still outgrossing some of the biggest launches on Steam. Three years on, *The Witcher* series as a whole hit 50 million games sold. Three years after that, *The Witcher 3* hit 50 million copies sold by itself. Even the release of *Arkham Knight* a month after *The Witcher*, once an event that Nowakowski feared would "roll over us", couldn't dent its momentum.

The response was ludicrous, enduring, historic, and unexpected. "I remember talking to people one week before launch," says Tost, "they had significant doubts whether this

would end up being received as a good game or not."

Some devs were, says Tost, "So deep in the trenches, looking at all the issues you are still working on, the imperfections that you specifically were aware of in your work," that they struggled to appraise the game's quality holistically. Critics soon dispelled that.

The day reviews went live, CDPR's office was full as the studio waited anxiously to see how the world had taken to its baby. "The tension in the air that day was tangible," says Tost. "People were technically supposed to work on whatever patch we were working on, but we could hear just the spamming of F5 keys when the time was near."

"The first one I saw was Gamespot," says Nowakowski, "that

COVER FEATURE

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

» gave us 10 out of 10, and I remember Adam and I, we just hugged”. There was maybe a touch of vindication, too, after all those talks with execs who didn’t think the studio could pull it off, “People who didn’t believe in the game – they were overwhelmed with the great reviews,” remembers Badowski. “There were high fives all the time, always screaming, shouting, ‘Another 10! Another 9! Another 10!’”

It was a scene repeated all throughout CD Projekt. “The second it dropped, you could hear it in the

corridors. Like, really, it was like echoes, like, ‘Yeaaaaah! 10!’” says Michał Platkow-Gilewski, CDPR’s VP of PR and communication.

Morale was high, the Metacritic score was surging, and devs were already beaver-ing away at the game’s two upcoming expansions, but it wasn’t all sunny weather. Beneath the din of *The Witcher 3*’s overwhelmingly positive reception, a small segment of players were stewing over what they perceived as a ‘downgrade’ in the game’s graphics between its glitzy E3



DEVS WERE ALREADY BEAVERING AWAY AT THE GAME’S TWO EXPANSIONS



MS SAYS YES

Lots of partners doubted CDPR, but Nowakowski says Microsoft was the “first party that actually believed in us big time”.



demos and the final release. The subreddits burbled, as subreddits do, with posts titled things like, “*The Witcher 3* got a massive downgrade,” and “*Witcher 3*: Graphical Downgrade Analysis.”

“That was horrible,” says Platkow-Gilewski. “There was this euphoria of, like, ‘Yeah! It’s great! It’s amazing!’ and at this same moment [there were] voices saying, ‘OK, but the version which we saw in 2013 was different than what we have in the game right now.’”

This was the game’s world rearing its head to throw down one last gauntlet, “Throughout the development process, everything changes,” says Platkow-Gilewski. “You first show the game in that state, then you introduce, I think it was a different renderer, different lighting. You need

to make it as global in-game as possible to avoid custom solutions, because it’s just too big. The game is too big to work on every scene. At that point, we didn’t know how big the issue was.”

Platkow-Gilewski sat down with Badowski and CDP founder Marcin Iwiński to figure out a response. “We had a frank discussion about, like, ‘What are we facing here?’” The answer was patches, tweaks and red meat for the crowd of PC gamers with rigs that could compute God: new settings to take full advantage of

their beefy machines, and soon the “storm wore off... but for a while, we were scared”.

But really, nothing short of the end of the world could have crushed CDPR’s high. Enthusiasm reached such a peak that it actually crashed the studio’s intranet that linked its Warsaw and Krakow offices. “One day we come into work,” says Tomasz Marchewka, who wrote for *The Witcher 3*’s *Blood and Wine* expansion, “And whenever you tried to connect to the editor to write a dialogue, you push a button

REASON TO BE

CDPR didn’t just plunk down buildings willy-nilly; its level designers worked with the lore team to give everything a reason to be where it is.

THE WITCHEUR

There are a lot more British voices in *The Witcher 3* because CDPR no longer had to make room for publisher demands for American accents.



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary

and you wait 50 seconds for the letter to appear on the screen”. This was, for a team that still had two full-game-sized pieces of DLC to produce, a suboptimal set of working conditions.

A few frantic calls to IT later and it turned out that – far from being a cyberattack or some kind of catastrophic system failure – the studio’s bandwidth had just been jammed by people checking and sharing reviews. “There’s nothing left for the letters to flow over the wire from Krakow to Warsaw. People couldn’t believe it went so well.”

THE POST-GAME

CDPR had already transformed since the days when it consisted in large part of a crew of niche RPG devs announcing their intention to take over the world in BioWare’s office. It had become bigger, more varied, more international. *The Witcher 3*’s development was the first time, in Radomska’s recollection, that the company couldn’t just write its internal docs in Polish, “I think at the beginning of *The Witcher 3*, we even wrote things in Polish. But then

we got a quest designer from outside Poland, and he was like, ‘I have no idea what the quests are about, come on guys!’”

Those shifts were gradual things compared to the growth that *The Witcher 3*’s success brought.

The studio, “Changed massively” says Badowski, “because we were growing fast from *The Witcher 1* through *Witcher 2* and *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*, but after *The Witcher: Wild Hunt*, the team became huge.”

Nowakowski concurs: “Hiring suddenly became easier, we were able to attach talent we were not able to before for financial reasons, because we suddenly were able to pay more and better, but also for the reasons that [people said], ‘OK, I wanna be attached to your next project... a lot of people were really touched with this story, and with the way we told it, and they said, ‘OK, I’m really up for being part of that.’”

And so, CDPR grew. And grew. And grew. To studio veterans, the post-*Witcher 3* CDPR is a completely

different beast compared to the pokey office they walked into 15 or 20 years ago. “I joined the company [in 2006],” says *Witcher 3* lead character artist Paweł Mielniczuk, “there were like 60 people here,” and they occupied a mere two rooms in the wider CD Projekt offices. They were also, prior to *The Witcher 1*’s release, not held in the highest esteem, “We were just this ugly child of the company that nobody wanted until *The Witcher 1*’s release... some guys living in a cellar making games.”

But all of that underwent “a complete transformation” over Mielniczuk’s career at CDPR. *The Witcher* series made more money than some countries, of course, but also, those two rooms full of devs doing god-knows-what turned into a company so big and spread out that “whatever you do, there’s no way you can know everybody”.

CDPR expanded off the back of *The Witcher 3*’s success, but it didn’t change its form. It was still the freewheeling, ad-libbing, relatively unorganised creature that had made *The Witcher 3*,

with what Badowski calls a “very flat structure” and “simple pipelines”. Nowakowski is more direct, “Things were chaotic in the way we were developing. We had this very ‘waterfall’ approach to development,

and were very siloed. A lot of things were developed in almost isolation, as weird as it may sound, so we sometimes didn’t see the actual effects of how it actually interacts until it was put together.”

The studio’s development process was not, Nowakowski stresses, a “burning cart on fire”, but CDPR’s methods were increasingly ill-suited to its grandiose ambitions. “I think at *The Witcher 3*, we could already hear the boat creaking a little bit, and I think we had a lot of luck and a lot of talent, a lot of talent with luck in their hands... that made it happen at the last moment.”

At the same time, some at the company struggled to adjust to its rapid ascension from scrappy underdog to industry leading light whose name could open any door, that

BANDWIDTH HAD BEEN JAMMED BY PEOPLE CHECKING REVIEWS





I'M GAME

The success of *Game of Thrones* gave CDPR confidence that people would take to *The Witcher 3*'s dark fantasy vibes.

RIGHT: Devs constantly went back to Sapkowski's *Witcher* books for inspiration and guidance (and still do).

BELOW: The lead character artist loved giving charming personalities to ugly monsters.



*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – 10th anniversary*MODERN
WARFARE

Nilfgaard's look was meant to make it seem like "the futuristic army of medieval times".

got a day-long visit from PlayStation's Mark Cerny because Sony wanted to know how its future consoles could make CDPR's job easier. "It started to be challenging because of the expectations," says Badowksi, "What's next?"

If you can see the iceberg marked 'Cyberpunk 2077's launch' on the horizon, you're not alone, but CDPR's leadership didn't take the breath it needed to realise there was a problem at the time. In fact, it didn't take that breath until after *Cyberpunk* launched, when the studio responded to the chaos by overhauling its structure. "We were marching," says Badowksi, "and we wanted to jump from one game to another, from *The Witcher* to expansions, from expansions to the next game".

But in 2015, *Cyberpunk* was years away, and CDPR still had a victory lap to run. These were two expansions – *Hearts of Stone* and *Blood and Wine* – that served as such a perfect capstone to the game as a whole it almost felt like the devs were showing off. *Hearts of Stone* came first, a

horror-tinged tale that sees Geralt face off against, well, pretty much Satan.

"*Hearts of Stone*, in my opinion, is maybe a little bit underrated," says Marcin Blacha. "It's a very popular expansion, it's really appreciated, but for me it was quite an achievement, because we did it in like, I don't know, half a year."

In fact, production went so smoothly that it made its makers suspicious. "Pretty early, we knew what to do, then we just did it in the first iteration. Then everybody looked at everyone, 'OK, it goes so well, something terrible is going to happen.' But nothing happened, and then we shipped it and everybody was like, 'What an great expansion!'"

Blood and Wine, the big brother of the two expansions and the one that added on a whole new map to the game's already wide and rambling open world, was a little more complex. Before *The Witcher 3* was even out, Augustynek remembers that the studio bosses were looking for an expansion pitch that was "different visually, very visually different" from



IT WAS PRETTY CLEAR WE WANT HER AS THE NEXT MAIN PERSON, MAIN CHARACTER



the main game but that “still feels like it belongs in Sapkowski”. Augustynek did what all *Witcher* devs do in times of creative need, he cracked open the original books. “I stumbled on [*Blood and Wine*’s setting] Beauclair and Toussaint and the whole thing of Regis being there – you know, one of my favourite characters from the books.”

The issue was, of course, that someone had melted Regis into a pool of bloody chunks in Sapkowski’s original stories, but Augustynek decided to revive him for his pitch anyway. “It is a little bit of fan service, but it’s for me, Adam’s not gonna accept it anyway.”

And then Adam accepted it, and Augustynek and co got to work on what would become Geralt’s retirement story, bidding farewell to the character that had transformed

CDPR irreversibly. Though, with this all kicking off in 2013, that transformation hadn’t quite reached full flower yet. “It was pretty early on we realised that this is where it ends, and also pretty early on, we knew that we wanted to work with Ciri later on... even like in 2014 it was already an idea floating around the studio that she’s next.”

Because, of course, Ciri is the true protagonist of *The Witcher* anyway. “In *Witcher 3*, Geralt is just helping out... he is there for her. So it was pretty clear we want her as the next main person, main character.”

So, on *The Witcher 3*’s tenth birthday, Geralt remains happily ensconced in his Toussaint manor, seemingly only returning to provide his gravelly tones to the odd trailer. But CDPR is staring at a fourth, Ciri-led game down the barrel – its first massive RPG since its post-*Cyberpunk* overhaul and its first *Witcher* game since the studio became a household name. You’ve got to wonder how it’s feeling about everything – past, present, and future.

“It’s a very well-established franchise,” says Blacha, who has once again taken up a lead writer mantle on the next game. “People love it, we know how to handle it. I’m pretty confident about *The Witcher 4*. I mean, we didn’t create Geralt and we didn’t create this world. We made it popular through the games. But the thing is I don’t think frequently about the past. It happened in the past. It shaped me in a way that I became confident about it... and it doesn’t make me anxious anymore. It just goes on. And it’s a nice feeling because, you know, I know that I created something big, and probably I will be remembered because of it.” ■



BFFL

If Dandelion ever left Geralt it’d be like “losing a part of the character” says lead writer Marcin Blacha.

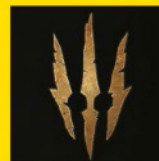
FANCY A ROUND OF GWENT?

What’s CDPR’s favourite Gwent faction?



NILFGAARD

Far and away the most popular Gwent faction, and also the personal favourite of big boss Adam Badowski.



MONSTERS

A surprise runner-up, the monster deck is heavy on summons and is the go-to choice for lead writer Marcin Blacha.



NORTHERN REALMS

The correct choice, and also the choice of joint-CEO Michał Nowakowski. Patriots one and all.

PC GAMER

**Subscribe
for six
months
& save 50%***

Great reasons to subscribe

- Brilliant value – save money when you subscribe
- **You'll never miss an issue**
- Delivered direct to your door and device

Choose your subscription & save 50%*

Keep your subscription rolling with payments every six months!

PRINT + DIGITAL EDITION



New!

Digital access to
120+ issues when
you subscribe
to print!**

£22.71

EVERY SIX MONTHS

DIGITAL EDITION



£18.17

EVERY SIX MONTHS

How to subscribe

visit www.magazinesdirect.com/PCG/DJ66D

call 0330 333 1113 and quote 'DJ66D'

or scan



TERMS & CONDITIONS: Offer closes 14/08/2025. Price is guaranteed for the first 6 months, please allow up to 6 weeks for the delivery of your first subscription issue (up to 8 weeks overseas) the subscription rate includes postage and packaging. *Savings are based on the cover price. Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period. **Access to digital library will end with your subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries and overseas rates please email: help@magazinesdirect.com or call +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time (excluding Bank Holidays). Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.



**YOU PLAY AS A YOUNG
WITCH AIMING TO BE
AN APPRENTICE, WHO
GETS BOOTED OFF
A MOUNTAIN**



PC GAMER

15

BEST MAIL
DELIVERY
GAMES ON PC

By Dainelle Lucas

RELEASED Jan 22, 2025 DEVELOPER Chibig, Nukefist

Mika and
The Witch's
Mountain

This way up

1 Delivering packages isn't a glamorous job, but it is an essential one, helping thousands of people get their much needed equipment, knick-knacks and, uh, fish bowls, in a timely fashion. Luckily for Mika she gets to do it on a broom rather than a van.

You play as a young witch aiming to be an apprentice, who gets booted off a mountain and told to work her way back up it on her own two feet. To do that she'll need to get a job and earn enough to fix and upgrade her broom. Handily the post office is in need of a new delivery person so Mika takes on the job and starts handing out packages while getting to know everyone in a town full of eccentrics. You'll need to deliver important items, and not-so-important ice creams before they melt. Being a post witch is harder than it looks, though.

RELEASED Sep 1, 2021 DEVELOPER Gamious

Lake

Handle with care

2 Ever wondered what returning to a simpler, more rural life would be like? City hot shot Meredith gets to experience just that as she goes back to her hometown to step in for her father as a mail carrier for two weeks. Set in the 1980s, *Lake* lets you experience the life of a delivery person at a gentle pace without the distraction of the internet. You'll get to know the locals and awkwardly rekindle old friendships with people you haven't spoken to in decades through in-depth dialogue choices. Maybe you'll even find romance alongside all of those addresses – talk about a good work-life balance!

It's the ultimate relaxed route with plenty of downtime – none of this modern insanely high Amazon quotas business to contend with. Just you, your van, and the smell of envelopes. Perhaps you'll even be tempted to stay on instead of returning to the city. We couldn't blame you, who wouldn't love a life of packages and lake views? You even get a nice little uniform to wear. This definitely gets our stamp of approval.

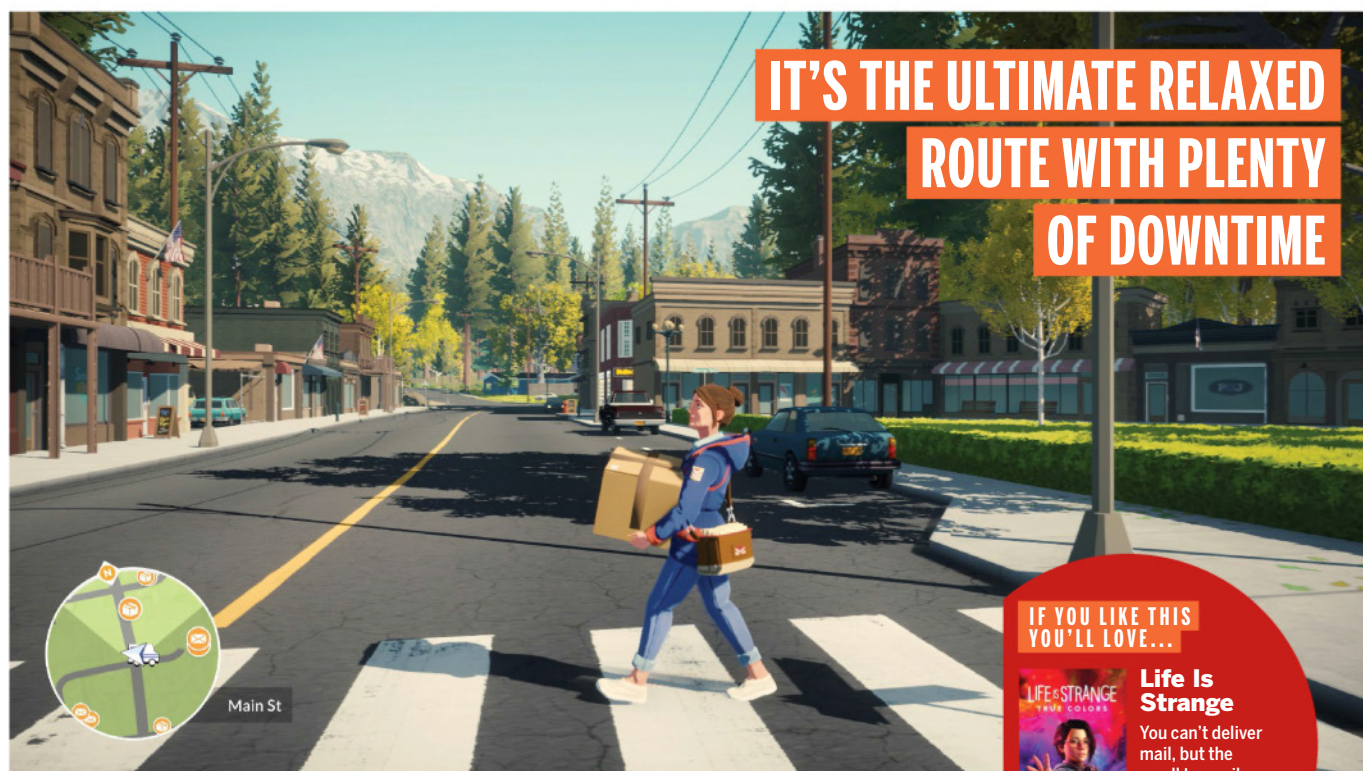


DEVELOPER Scott Malthouse

Quill

Lett'er have it

3 This one requires you to actually get a pen and paper out to draft your letters. Available for free on itch.io you set up a character who needs to write letters to leave the strongest impression on the recipient, but doing so is harder than it looks. You'll have an ink pot of words as prompts that you'll roll dice to use inferior or superior versions of, and get scored at the end of each paragraph. Your final score determines how your letter is received and if you're successful and delivering your missive.



RELEASED Apr 23, 2020 DEVELOPER ION Lands

Cloudpunk

Air mail

4 If you're going to deliver post you might as well look cool doing it. Exploring the cyberpunk city of Nivalis as a delivery driver in your own spaceship, you're responsible for getting things where they need to go – be that the dark streets of the lower layers, or the tops of spires above. You'll learn a lot about the city on your rounds as you take care of legal and not-so-legal drop offs.



RELEASED Apr 1, 2021 DEVELOPER Infogrames

Totally Reliable Delivery

Postage guaranteed

5 Ever found your package in a recycling bin on collection day, or watched one of those videos where a delivery driver just chucks something over a wall? They probably trained themselves on this. Rag-doll physics and a range of insane vehicles makes for a playground full of chaos where, hopefully, some of your customers will get their deliveries. It's stupid and messy fun.



RELEASED Oct 7, 2024 DEVELOPER Popcannibal

Kind Words 2

To whom it may concern

6 Being responsible for mail doesn't always mean that you have to be the one to deliver it, sometimes you need to be the one to produce it. The sequel to the small, but phenomenal *Kind Words*, this game adds more layers and opportunities to the letter writing process so you can send out your thoughts and feelings to

thousands of like-minded individuals around the globe. It's like pen-palling, but without needing to lick any stamps. The game includes everything from *Kind Words 1* and even lets you still send letters between both games, but the sequel lets you wander around little dioramas and enter spaces for specific messages. You can look for recommendations in a shop, share poetry in a cafe or even scream your letters into a void for no one to see just for the catharsis of writing it all out. Letters arrive via paper aeroplane, and it gives you a chance to answer anything and broaden your horizons. You even get your own little writing desk.



DEVELOPER Kojima Productions

Death Stranding

Post traumatic stress

7 Even the apocalypse and horrifying black-goo monsters can't prevent this postman from finishing his route across a broken America. Sam is the ultimate postie, capable of delivering any package across any terrain thanks to his bottled baby companion. It beats a van's GPS.

Sure, it might be a particularly dangerous version of the job, but it must pay well with risks such as time-destroying weather, and the need to shift corpses. The health insurance is good too – get killed on the job? No problem, just swim back to your body and make your next delivery.



DEVELOPER CT Matthews

Ducky's Delivery Service

Flight risk

8

Even the smallest of parcels can brighten up your day, and so can the smallest of games. Here you play as a duck in a propeller hat who flies around and delivers mail as fast as he can. It's surprisingly intense as you have to dodge frequent obstacles such as stalactites, seagulls and ghosts when out on your rounds and deliver everything as fast as you can. It's a challenging little platformer that sees you cutting corners by chucking mail at letter boxes and hoping it lands correctly. Please don't become our mail carrier, Ducky.

IF YOU LIKE THIS
YOU'LL LOVE...



Celeste

Much darker, but with a similar pixel art style as well as tight platforming and climbing to enjoy.

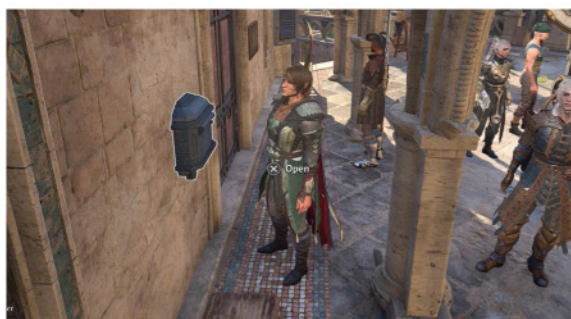
HERE YOU PLAY AS
A DUCK IN A
PROPELLER HAT WHO
FLIES AROUND AND
DELIVERS MAIL

RELEASED Aug 3, 2023 DEVELOPER Larian

Baldur's Gate III (act 3)

Addressing issues

9 You could argue that act 3 feels like a separate game as the city of Baldur's Gate is just so huge and completely different to what came before. You might not be able to deliver mail, but you can help keep the service running by assisting out some pigeons. And opening other people's mailboxes to search for quest info isn't considered stealing, so that makes you an unofficial postie.

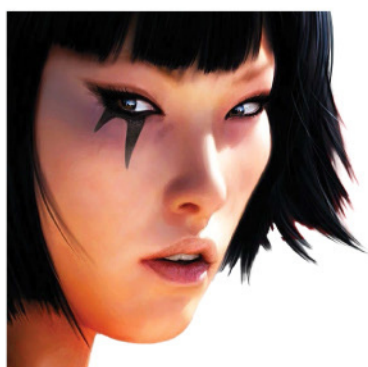


DEVELOPER Dice

Mirror's Edge

Courier catastrophe

11 The oldest game on this list, and yet somehow it still holds its own thanks to its enduring style of courier delivery. Faith is a runner who effortlessly parkours around The City carrying important documents and data to their intended recipients without falling under too much surveillance. You'll need to be extremely fit and unbothered by heights if you want to take on one of these postal routes, as you'll need to weave your way across rooftops and through restricted areas, trusting in your own body to stick a landing rather than falling to the streets below.



RELEASED Oct 20, 2022 DEVELOPER Fractal Phase

Flying Neko delivery

Part and parcel

10 You don't need to be a human to take on the job of delivering post by flying broomstick, cats are just as capable of donning a pointy hat and taking to the skies. This is the second game on the list to fill that Kiki's Delivery Service-style game niche, but this one is much more freeform with more customisation and magic portals that open up new areas to explore.



RELEASED Aug 31, 2021 DEVELOPER Fireship Games

KeyWe

A package of joy

12 Mail isn't just about writing and delivering it, you also need to sort it at the post office and that's where Jeff and Debra come in. Two tiny kiwi birds in charge of managing where things need to go, and without an opposable thumb between them. You'll need to flap around several mail rooms to complete various tasks

such as typing out telegrams or sorting letters under the watchful eye of your octopus manager. You can play on your own, but you're better off recruiting a friend to help control both birds and get the job done. It's part platformer, part puzzle as you have to leap to each workstation and figure out how to press all of the right buttons, usually with your bum.

You'll also need to contend with the ever changing weather and seasons adding hazards to the office such as sandstorms, floods and carnivorous plants that leave you wondering why you can't just close the windows. It all makes for an chaotic work environment.



RELEASED Apr 2, 2015 DEVELOPER Frontier Developments

Elite Dangerous

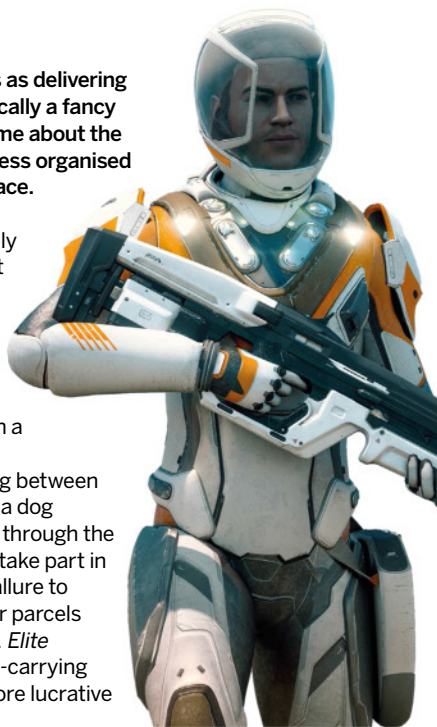
Long-haul delivery

13

Delivering freight still counts as delivering mail, and a spaceship is basically a fancy van, so this is definitely a game about the postal service. Just a much less organised one and, you know, set in space.

Ship upkeep can be expensive and incredibly dangerous so the best way to deal with that is by first getting yourself a job running cargo across the milky way and praying you don't run into any ne'er-do-wells. Eventually you'll start scraping together enough money to upgrade your craft to fit in more lucrative deliveries and maybe even a defensive gun or two.

Other players are always out there hiding between the stars, waiting to snatch your goods like a dog attacking a newspaper the second it pokes through the letterbox. Sure, you could zoom off and go take part in some space battles, but there's a calming allure to being a space trucker and making sure your parcels arrive safely on the other side of the galaxy. *Elite Dangerous* definitely isn't the safest of mail-carrying careers, but if you persist it is one of the more lucrative ones. Just watch out for the aliens.



YOU NEED TO CLIMB
TREES AND GIANT
MUSHROOMS AND
LEARN TO GLIDE
THROUGH THE AIR



IF YOU LIKE THIS
YOU'LL LOVE...



No Man's Sky

You might not have freight, but you will do a lot more exploring and crafting.



DEVELOPER Kela Van Der Deijl

Mail Time

Stamp of approval

14 Ever wanted to be an adorable little mushroom-person prancing around a forest? *Mail Time* lets you do just that, but you'll need a job to sustain all of that twee. You'll need to become a mail Scout and deliver letters to other denizens of the forest such as birds and squirrels. Animals need their Amazon deliveries, too.

Your postal route is a tricky one though, you need to climb trees and giant mushrooms and learn to glide through the air with the help of an oversized envelope. Let's just hope no one's written 'Do not bend' on it.

RELEASED: May 29, 2018 DEVELOPER Villa Gorilla

Yoku's Island Express

First-class frolics

15 What better way is there to make sure a parcel reaches its destination than through the art of pinball? Sure, there may not be as much space as a Ford Transit, but it gets the job done and is great for bouncing your way through caves and forests. This lively island finally has a new postmaster, but you'll have a lot of work on your hands to return things to normal as the local deity has been attacked and the island is in chaos. You'll need to unite everyone and beat up some bosses to achieve the postal network of your dreams.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother, Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong, ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant, Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World, Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III, Redfall, Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends, Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World, Skull and Bones, Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic, Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4, Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring, Factorio, Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3, Minecraft, Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Tiberian fun

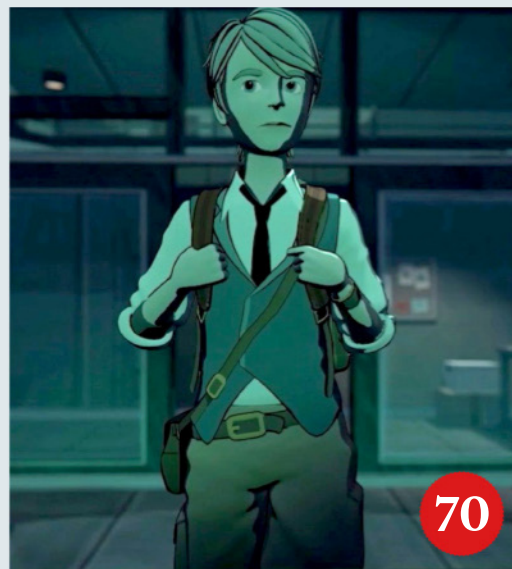
As someone who started PC gaming in the early 1990s, I have an enduring soft spot for RTS games, having been schooled on now legendary titles such as *Command & Conquer*, *Total Annihilation*, and *StarCraft*. These were PC games after all, unique, mature, strategic, and complex experiences that typified what PC gaming was all about, separating it from the more casual console gaming experiences on offer.

So how nice it is to see *Tempest Rising* release today in 2025 as not just a love letter to those classic RTS games like *Red Alert* and *Tiberian Sun*, but a confident and incredibly fun evolution of the genre, too, one that brings with it plenty of modern touches that make the game so much more than a simple glow-up revisiting of old ground. There's even gloriously ropey acting on display in cutscenes, too.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



Contents

- 66** Tempest Rising
- 70** **Blue Prince**
- 72** The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Remastered
- 76** **Expelled! An Overboard Game**
- 78** Clair Obscur: Expedition 33
- 82** **Old Skies**
- 84** South of Midnight
- 85** **The Last of Us Part 2 Remastered**

FREE GAMES

- 86** Ephemeral Frame
- 87** **Dull Acres**
- 87** Untime

THEY'RE BACK

- 88** Firewatch
- 89** **A Short Hike**
- 89** TheHunter: Call of the Wild

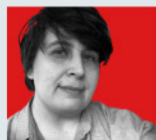
This month's FMV-ready reviewers...



RICK LANE
Specialist in
Dodgy FMV acting
Currently playing
Tempest Rising
This month
Built an Obelisk of Light
outside PCG Towers in
order to protect us from
console gamer invasion.



**CHRISTOPHER
LIVINGSTON**
Specialist in
Mansion mysteries
Currently playing
Blue Prince
This month
Finally discovered the
46th room in his house.
It was filled with tacos.



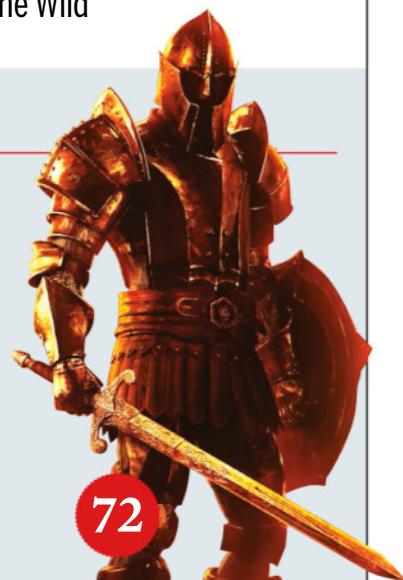
KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Adoring Fan murder
Currently playing
Oblivion Remastered
This month
Was seen dumping a
large, heavy sack into
Lake Rumare. We're
sure it's just apples.



JUSTIN WAGNER
Specialist in
Wearing berets
Currently playing
*Clair Obscur:
Expedition 33*
This month
Ate nothing but plates
of snails. He doesn't
like fast food. Get it?!



ABBIE STONE
Specialist in
Framing people
Currently playing
*Expelled! An
Overboard Game*
This month
Was shocked to hear
that honour student
Mary killed that cat.



TIBERIAN SON

TEMPEST RISING is a rollicking RTS just like mama Westwood used to make

By Rick Lane

Calling *Tempest Rising* a spiritual successor to *Command & Conquer* would undersell just how fiercely this game wants to be a part of the Westwood dynasty. From the thinly veiled faction analogues to the thundering synth-metal soundtrack, right down to the mission interludes in which your faction's influence bleeds through the countries of Europe on the campaign map, Slippgate Ironworks' mimicry of Westwood's 1995 RTS is utterly brazen.

Yet *Tempest Rising* does more than sneak into *Command & Conquer*'s room and prance about in its clothes. It understands what made Westwood's RTS such a timeless classic, enriching those elements to suit a modern audience. Its RTS action is pacey and spectacular, its dual factions are tactically divergent and demonstrate surprising strategic depth. Most importantly of all, its twin campaigns are meticulously crafted pressure-cookers that spin out the strategic fundamentals in thrilling, imaginative ways.

Tempest Rising takes the premise of *C&C*, switches out a few proper nouns and chucks in a nuclear war for good measure. Set in 1997 in the wake of World War III, the world has become afflicted by a strange new growth called Tempest, a russet, flowery structure that looks like a plant but isn't. Tempest is hazardous to human health and spreads rapaciously, but it's also an abundant energy resource. This makes it the primary catalyst of a war between Earth's two dominant factions, the Global Defence Force (GDF) and the Tempest Dynasty.

Likewise, the basic play of *Tempest Rising* will be familiar to anyone even vaguely accustomed with real-time strategy. You establish a headquarters in a corner of the map, harvest some resources, build a base, recruit an army comprised of infantry and vehicles, then dispatch that army to pummel your opponent. *Tempest Rising* doesn't alter these fundamentals in any radical fashion

– it never intended to. But how you do these things is different depending on which faction you play as.

While the GDF and Tempest Dynasty are broad approximations of *C&C*'s GDI and Brotherhood of Nod, there's considerably more going on in terms of how each faction operates. Virtually every action you perform in *Tempest Rising* works differently depending on the

faction you play as. The GDF, for example, harvests resources using a refinery building that comes with its own Tempest-gobbling dump truck,

while the Tempest Dynasty uses a mobile harvesting rig with wheels that double as cute little cluster-robots when deployed.

ALL ABOUT THAT BASE

Even basic construction works differently for each faction. The GDF place building blueprints on the ground which then construct over time, whereas the Tempest Dynasty hark back to the original *C&C*, building their structures within the construction menu, then placing them on the ground where they assemble instantly.

This asymmetry is most important, of course, when it comes to units and combat. The GDF is built around advanced technology and intel gathering. Its ground infantry are supported by drone pilots which fire micromissiles against vehicles and aircraft. The Tempest Dynasty, by comparison, takes a more fire and fury approach to combat, with an army led by flamethrower infantry and supported by off-road SUVs that fire cluster missiles and devastatingly powerful mobile rocket trucks.

Most units have an active ability, which is complemented by a small selection of faction-wide abilities you can use at any time. These can also be combined in powerful ways. For example, the GDF can recruit a specialist sniper unit who can turn invisible, letting her sneak up to enemy positions and pick off infantry targets. But the GDF can also call in an airstrike on any positions it has line of sight with. So you can effectively use the sniper to conduct one-unit bombing raids on distant enemy bases. Of course, you'll have to watch out for the Dynasty's machinist, as this specialist can detect enemy units in stealth.

I could spend this whole review hashing out all the various abilities and combinations, but two things *Tempest Rising* is particularly good at are supporting armies within the field and empowering territory

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A self-appointed *Command & Conquer* successor with modern production values and a few mechanical tweaks

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Slippgate Ironworks

PUBLISHER
3D Realms,
Knights Peak

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
32 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
tempestrising.com

The world has become afflicted by a strange new growth

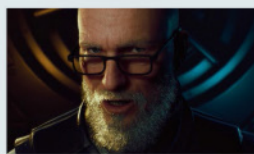
COMMANDER & CONQUER

Get ready to take orders from this lot



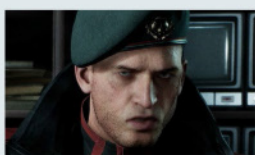
COLONEL FISHER

Your immediate superior in the GDF. A straight-up fellow who expects the best.



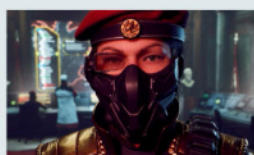
UNDERSECRETARY GREENE

Advisor to the shadowy Council of Directors. Couldn't be slimier if he lived in a pond.



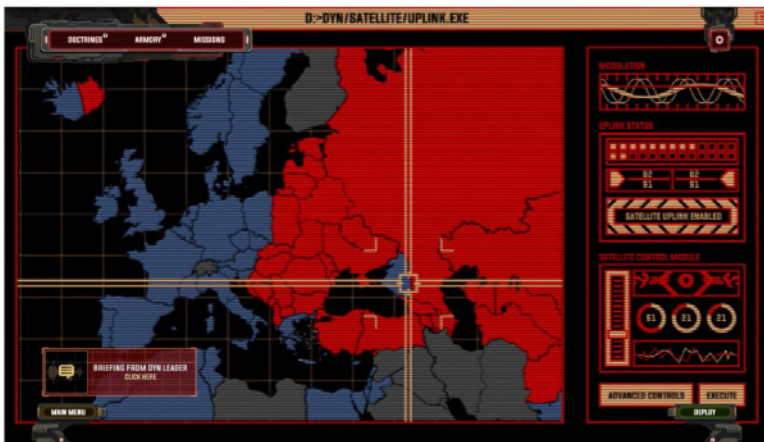
ALEKS MOLACHIN

Your boss in the Tempest Dynasty. Talks tough, but is scared he'll be supplanted by you.



JELENA MELNIK

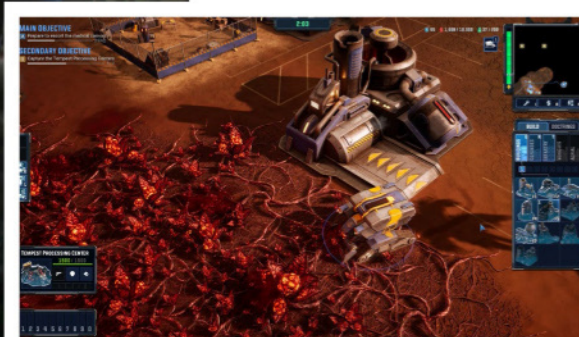
Dynasty's intelligence officer. Committed to the cause, but has questions about it.



ABOVE: *Tempest Rising*'s factions lean into different combat strategies.

FAR LEFT: While the GDF get a fancy 3D strategic overview, the *Tempest Dynasty*'s map is ripped straight from 1995.





FAR RIGHT:
Establishing and then
defending outposts is
key to map control.

BELOW: Missions
are varied and offer
interesting objectives.



control. Both factions feature abilities that let them quickly establish small sub-outposts to claim key points on the map like Tempest fields. The GDF can call down a beacon that lets it build anything within its radius while it's active, while the Dynasty can recruit a salvage van that can deploy as a small construction centre, which lets you construct buildings and defence while automatically repairing them when damaged. This means the GDF can spring up a small outpost out of nowhere, while the Dynasty can combine salvage vans with its harvesting rigs to spread across the map like a weed.

Has that same immediacy and boldness that makes the old C&C games fun

NODDING ALONG

In short, beneath *Tempest Rising's* simple throwback exterior are a ton of more specific features and abilities you can take tactical advantage of. Admittedly, it can be difficult to remember all these nuances in the heat of battle, but *Tempest Rising* tries to assist you in a number of ways.

The main way *Tempest Rising* readies you for battle, however, is through its campaigns. Both campaigns are designed to guide you through the specifics of each faction, but they're not tedious tutorials. Indeed, they're totally unafraid to throw you into the wringer. The fifth mission of the GDF campaign, for example, sees you assume control of a central base with the goal of destroying several Dynasty convoys. These convoys travel through different areas of the map at set times. So you must clear out these areas of Dynasty defences and have enough firepower left over to deal with the convoy, while managing Dynasty attacks on your base, all in the space of about 25 minutes.

There are also just some great mission premises in general. The sixth mission of the GDF campaign is titled Pull That Base Apart, a stirring call to action that sees you slowly dismantling a sprawling Dynasty operation with a sniper and a handful of stealth hover tanks. The Dynasty campaign is a little slower to get going, but there's a great mid-campaign mission where you're abruptly pulled from the frontline for some bullshit assignment to help a large-scale Tempest harvesting

operation meet its quota. Naturally, things don't go to plan, and you end up having to defend multiple bases from a massive GDF assault.

Slipgate understands how to craft exciting mission concepts out of the basic RTS toolkit, and *Tempest Rising* has that same immediacy and boldness that makes the old C&C

games still fun to play 30 years on. This culminates in a dramatically different final act for both campaigns, one where you battle against a third faction known as the Vet, which function in a wholly

different manner from the Dynasty and the GDF. I won't go into too many specifics about the Vet, apart from to say they are quite scarily powerful and have some units that make the Dynasty's crushing spheres look boring. In any case, their arrival into the campaigns gives them a real shot in the arm. Indeed, the final mission of the GDF campaign ended with me utterly beaten – I was saved only by the clock.

As a package, *Tempest Rising* is pretty neat and tidy, with no glaring flaws I could point to. There are a few areas where I think it could be better, however. While the third

faction is present in the campaign, you can't play as them yet in multiplayer or skirmishes – they're planned for a future update. And while I wouldn't say I'm disappointed by this as such, a third campaign centred around the Vet would certainly help *Tempest Rising* stand apart from its inspiration.

Elsewhere, the fact the campaigns have the same general trajectory means whichever one you play second won't have the same impact as the first. Finally, the inter-mission briefings are a welcome callback to C&C, but the realtime 3D characters simply don't have the charm of Westwood's lovably daft FMVs.

Tempest Rising looks great in motion, with your vehicles kicking up dust as they roll across terrain, destroyed buildings collapsing in big, soupy explosions, and aircraft spinning out of the sky when shot down. Arguably more important, however, is that it sounds fantastic. Not only is the game itself sufficiently thunderous, but the soundtrack is absolutely tremendous, with an array of musicians paying gleeful tribute to the music of C&C. Standout tracks include Death Squad, a Mick Gordon-ish spin on *Red Alert's* Hell March, a pulsing, Rammstein-like synth affair named Aegis and a metal Soviet anthem written by former *Witcher* composer Adam Skorupa.

Short of that third playable faction and a few more personable faces between missions, *Tempest Rising* is as good as you could hope a C&C successor to be. I say this with enthusiasm, but also some relief. The RTS has been in active retreat for years now, with strategy gaming pushing overwhelmingly toward turn-based tactics and grander 4X affairs. There have been several attempted counteroffensives, but none have succeeded.

Rather than try any bold new gambits, *Tempest Rising* digs its heels in, mounting a stalwart defence of everything that made the RTS great in the first place. It may not revolutionise the genre, but apart from that, *Tempest Rising* is exactly what the RTS needs right now. ■

CONQUER

Some of the standout units



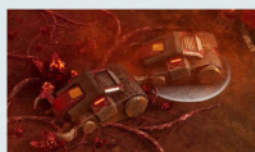
SCRAMBLER GDF

A stealth hover tank with poor armour but high damage and long range, making it a fantastic ambush predator.



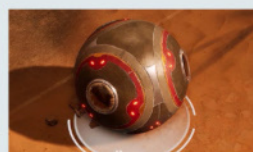
TREBUCHET GDF

A heavy tank that converts into an artillery cannon. Very slow, but utterly devastating in the right position.



MOBILE HARVESTING RIG TEMPEST DYNASTY

The Dynasty's harvesting unit collects Tempest with its cluster-bot wheels. Not an offensive unit, but still cool.



TEMPEST SPHERE TEMPEST DYNASTY

A giant metal ball with no ranged capabilities, but which instantly destroys small and medium units by crushing them.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Retro in spirit yet modern where it counts, *Tempest Rising* is a riveting flashback to the halcyon days of the RTS.

85

OPEN HOUSE

Unravel the mysteries of a mansion, room by room, in **BLUE PRINCE**

By Christopher Livingston

I love *Blue Prince* so much I'm going to spend this entire review telling you as little about it as possible. Unravelling its many mysteries and solving its multitude of puzzles – several of which I'm still working on even after finishing the game – is best done if you go in with nearly no information. Don't watch videos. Don't Google solutions. Don't even finish reading this review. Just go play it and you'll discover one of the best puzzle games in years.

Still reading? Fine. In this first-person strategy roguelike puzzler, you've inherited a sprawling mansion from an eccentric relative, but to prove you're worthy of such a gift you have to complete a

simple task: explore the 45-room manor, then find and enter its hidden 46th room.

The tricky bit? You're building the mansion yourself as you explore it. Click on a door handle and you're presented with a choice of three room cards: you might see a kitchen, a den and a bedroom, or perhaps more exotically, a cloister, an observatory and an aquarium. Whichever room of the three choices you pick (or draft, as I'll call it from here on), that's the room you'll find when you open the door.

Every room has different attributes, some positive, some negative, some a bit of both. A darkroom won't let you see which three cards you're about to draft, for instance, while a drawing room, appropriately, will let you re-draw the rooms if you're not happy with what you've drafted. Draft a great hall and you'll find lots of doors – but they're all locked.

Doorways are important when drafting rooms since you're trying to build a walkable path through the grid to get as deep into the mansion as you can: draft too many rooms with no exits and you won't be able to proceed. Just about every draft requires at least a few moments of thought, and sometimes a great deal of strategic debate. Should I draft a closet because it has useful items

inside even though it's a dead end? Or should I choose a hallway because it means I can get a little further, even though it won't contain anything useful around there?

Every draft requires at least a few moments of thought

HOUSE OF CARDS

You begin each day with a total of just 50 steps, and each time you pass through a doorway you spend a step. Run out of steps and the mansion completely resets.

That's where the real strategy comes into play. Say you ran into a locked door 11 steps ago, but now you've found a key – is it worth spending

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person puzzle strategy adventure set in a mysterious, shifting mansion

EXPECT TO PAY

£25

DEVELOPER

Dogubomb

PUBLISHER

Raw Fury

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070

MULTIPLAYER

No

STEAM DECK

Playable

LINK

blueprincegame.com

another 11 steps to backtrack to that door, or should you keep moving ahead? Tricky decision!

Then there's all the amazing and elegant puzzles, none of which I'll spoil here, because that would be mean. Since the house is different every time you build it, you won't see these puzzles all at once but over multiple runs, like finding a code on Day 3 but not realising what it's for until Day 11. So many times during *Blue Prince* I'd come across a portrait or a statue or a note and know it meant something, but not understand its significance until much later – or, I'd realise its significance immediately because it pertained to something I'd seen much earlier.

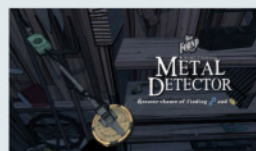
I've had so many great 'eureka!' moments (though mine are usually expressed as 'holy shit!') where I spotted something for the first time and then flipped frantically through my notes because I'd seen something related to it in a different room on an earlier run. If you love long, drawn-out puzzles, poring over notes, keeping careful track of dozens of little details like a detective – *Her Story*, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, *Return of the Obra Dinn* – *Blue Prince* will be pure bliss.

By the time I finally entered the 46th room, I truly felt like I'd earned it. I was the rightful heir, damn it. It really was my house now. And like I said, even finishing the game left me with plenty more puzzles to solve. I'm not done with *Blue Prince* yet, not by a longshot, oh no.

So grab a pen and paper. Lower the lights. Draft your rooms, count your steps, and let the mysteries of the mansion slowly unfold to reveal one of the best puzzle games that I've played in years. ■

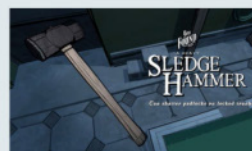
YARD SALE

The most useful items



METAL DETECTOR

It'll beep when coins and keys are close, helping you find resources you might have missed.



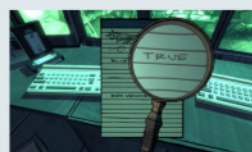
SLEDGE HAMMER

Use this to smash open locked crates to find loot in true adventurer fashion.



UPGRADE DISK

Improve the attributes of some of the mansion's rooms. Now you just need to find a computer...



MAGNIFYING GLASS

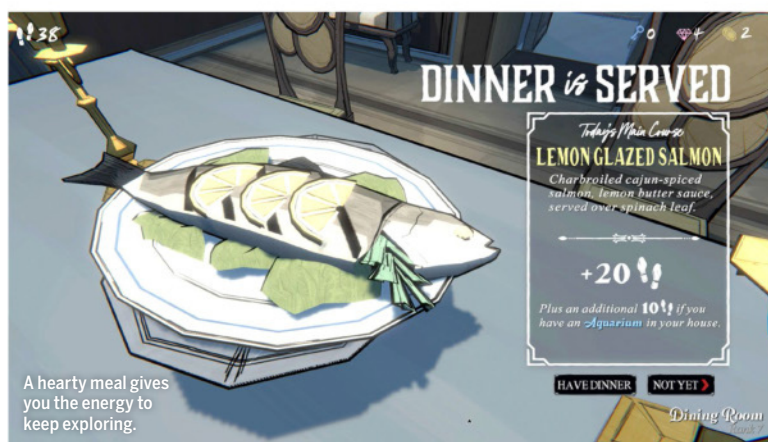
Photos, letters, notes... always read the fine print, and it's easier to do with one of these.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

This elaborate and elegant strategy adventure is one of the best puzzle games in years.

90



ABOVE: There's no scares, but there's plenty of mystery.

BELOW: Doing a little stargazing is always worth your time.



CYRODILICIOUS

OBLIVION REMASTERED is a beautiful, buggy wonder

By Kerry Brunskill

In 2006 *Final Fantasy XII* was a brand new PlayStation 2 game, the Xbox 360's hard drive was at least in spirit still an optional extra, and horse armour DLC was the biggest corporate issue surrounding *Oblivion*'s launch. I didn't play the game back then because I thought I didn't need to – I had *Morrowind*, a smug sense of superiority, and no use for a sequel. I might have been wrong about that.

Although *Oblivion*'s tutorial-laden intro, starring the most obviously doomed MacGuffin-carrying Emperor who ever briefly lived, didn't do a great job of convincing me otherwise. Was a rat-filled sewer, the most clichéd RPG environment of them all, honestly the best opening they could come up with? And then I escaped that boring place, and all of my grumbles were instantly forgotten.

This sunlit paradise doesn't look like a game that came out when My Chemical Romance songs were in the top ten. Dragonflies flit across the water as flowers sway gently in the breeze.

I immediately decide I'm going to walk, rather than fast-travel, to the next conveniently marked story location just so I can take in my gorgeous surroundings. But the path ahead isn't quite as beautiful as the one I'm about to leave behind, and that makes me take one last look back and... hang on, is something glowing on that small island just across the water? Nope, not happening. I've got a magical plot device to deliver and I don't want to get sidetracked straight away and then never recover. But... a little peek wouldn't hurt seeing as I'm already here, would it?

DUNGEON DIVING

One short swim later and I'm loot-deep in the Vilverin ruins. The tripwire across the entrance I spot just before I set it off may as well be an invitation – if these bandits want me to stay out that badly then there's got to be something worth spending a little time searching for down here.

I'm so enthralled by this mysterious place I don't even realise I've jumped down into another area with no real idea how I can get back up, and I just shrug and carry on anyway. I'm actually a little disappointed when I notice the name 'Bandit ringleader' above someone's health bar, assuming I'll be done here when they finally drop dead. My assumption was way, way off. I spot another mysterious door.

Behind it lies a small area with not much in it – is that a pressure plate?

My improvised adventure spirals into a world of skeletons, underwater

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The *Oblivion* you've always known and modded with a few tweaks and a fresh coat of polygons on top

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios, Virtuos

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bethesda.net

swims into the unknown, and swinging-blade traps. I don't even care how long I've been here and any urgency to get on with the 'real' story has long gone, because I'm having too much fun here and now. I eventually clear the dungeon, grab some shiny loot, then exit via a handy shortcut.

That sunset I left behind has transformed into a breathtaking canopy of stars. I'm in awe. I've done more than just clear a dungeon or complete a subquest, I've explored.

STORY TIME

Ploughing through *Oblivion*'s array of quests is simple thanks to a UI that makes it easy to follow one thread, helpfully keeps interesting side activities separate from main events, and never leaves me more than a click or two away from a map with big red 'GO HERE NEXT' markers.

The sheer variety of experiences these markers can lead to keeps surprising me. I've sneaked around sleeping cultists. Stolen treasures from forbidden trap-filled labyrinths that had me thinking, "I wish somebody would make a fantasy *Tomb Raider*." In one memorable incident I found myself delicately balancing a drug addiction with the need to push through a place crawling with monsters (I was not completely successful at managing the severe stat debuffs that came with the withdrawal).

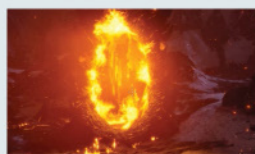
Even the parts of *Oblivion* where I keep my weapons sheathed are intriguing. Every new town and oddball inn stuck in the middle of nowhere has someone worth talking to, or some locked room, suspicious well, or half-hidden hatch. The land is heaving with everything from harmless bookcases to unsettling secret murderholes, my curiosity a catalyst for idle rummages around someone's personal belongings and desperate dashes to safety, new memories made at every turn.

It's just a shame everyone I have to talk to looks so damned strange.

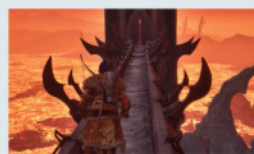
I immediately decide I'm going to walk, rather than fast-travel

HOLIDAY GUIDE TO OBLIVION

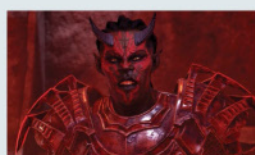
Highlights of your stay in a hellscape



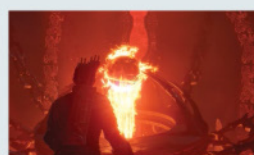
TERRIFYING PORTALS
You're guaranteed a very warm welcome in Oblivion, that's for sure. Heart warming, literally.



FANTASTIC VIEWS
Lava, spikes, and unbridled chaos as far as the eye can see, Oblivion's scenery is memorable.



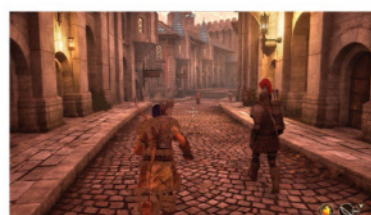
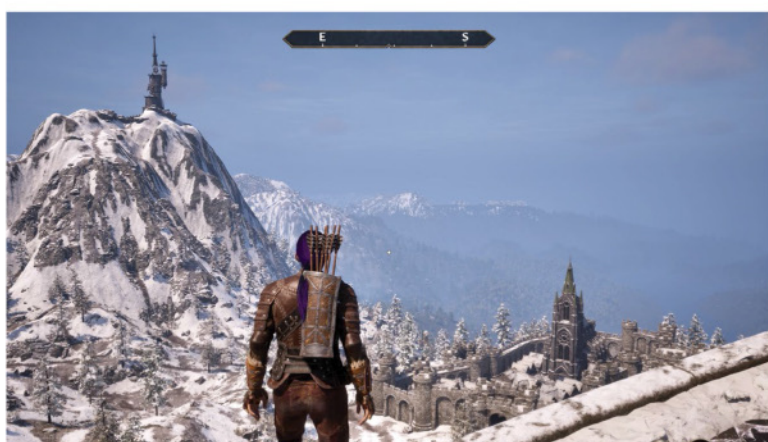
FRIENDLY LOCALS
Uniformed staff are on hand to attend to you everywhere. You just don't get this service in Cyroil.



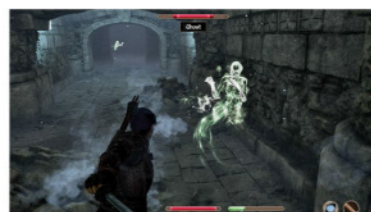
COLLAPSE REALITY
Steal a sigil stone and everything turns into a burning void. Talk about vacation excitement!



Definitely not creepy. Nope, not a bit.



FAR LEFT: It's worth taking it slow just to see the views.



LEFT: I ain't afraid of no ghosts. Honest.



Is it a dungeon if there aren't any deadly traps?



RIGHT: Faces are the worst kind of better – technically better.

FAR RIGHT: I can make my character look awful, or terrible.



☞ The models used for these people, from plain old humans to the catlike khajiit, may have been overhauled, but they're wrong in every way that matters. Animations and expressions are simplistic and cartoonishly exaggerated, completely at odds with the new high-resolution textures and additional details they're contorting to accommodate. They often spoil the mood; creating an unintentional disconnect between the intriguing adventures I'm offered, the hard work of the actors voicing the dialogue, and the visual comedy playing out before me.

I can't even always catch what's being said. As the original game had its bugs, *Oblivion Remastered* isn't without issues: subtitles tend to show up only when they feel like it. I could understand if this was defined by my distance to the speaker, but I've had people I was rubbing shoulders with hold full back-and-forths without a single line appearing. I'm not just missing out on key story moments when this happens, I'm missing out on the flavour that comes from random NPCs grousing as I stroll down a city street and the immersive, sometimes life-saving battlecries of my allies too.

DISHING OUT DPS

Some methods of dispatching whoever crosses my path are much more satisfying than others. Sneak-attacking enemies with a bow from afar never gets old, and neither does filling a monster full of arrows as they

try to close the distance. Spellcasting is pleasantly frantic, fireball flinging imagined as something athletic and imprecise. It's a lot of fun – so long as I'm not using a controller. With a traditional KBM setup I can freely switch between anything I've assigned to the 1-8 keys as I move around. Smoothly shifting from

lightning lobbing to a quick heal and back again as I jump around couldn't be easier. But on a controller I have to rely on a customisable radial menu to switch between spells, and for some reason opening

this locks my character in place, practically guaranteeing the enemy will get some free hits in and tarnishing a control method that otherwise works beautifully.

Even in remastered form, melee combat is a disappointment. There's a distinct lack of weight and meaningful reaction to my blows. I'm not swinging a sword or blocking an incoming attack, I'm pressing buttons as animations play out and health bars deplete. This lack of reactivity is only exacerbated by the game's AI, which, huh, seems to have been pulled directly out of 2006. I shouldn't be able to kill an entire cult's worth of weirdos by kiting them around their own altar, and it'd be nice if monsters consistently noticed when their fellow fiends drop dead a few feet away.

Bugs pop up often, many of them quest-related. Key NPCs get stuck repeating the same lines and scripted sequences fail to correctly move on to

the next state in the stack. These aren't edge cases, but early mainline scenarios. They leave me questioning everything I do: did I succeed here because I was clever, lucky, or did another bug swing this fight in my favour? Have I missed something, or has the game broken down again?

Some jank is to be expected, but this is a brand-new remaster. Surely almost 20 years is enough time to iron out issues with common quests.

And add some meaningful reactivity to them. The guild quests don't shine quite so brightly in a post-*Baldur's Gate III* landscape. A single arrow loosed at the wrong moment was all it took for the Dark Brotherhood's messenger to gleefully declare me a cold-blooded killer, and in an astonishing lack of player agency I was forced to accept their quest. The guild does lead to some fun moments, but it also lays bare how little RP resides in this RPG's storytelling. I have no real choice but to do as I'm told, all paths leading to the same end. I'm exactly as virtuous or vengeful as the latest quest giver needs me to be, and *Oblivion* felt smaller for it.

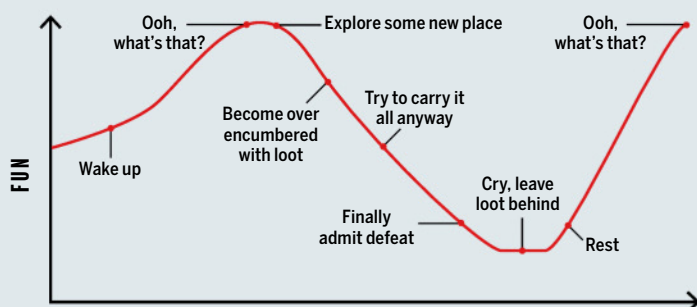
But when it does work, and to be fair it usually does, I'm fully absorbed in this fantasy world. I can sit in a tavern and listen to NPCs strike up conversations with each other, or organically overhear something that adds a new topic to my conversations. I'm desperate to climb every mountain peak and dive into every deep lake because I know there's always something worthwhile waiting for me. Maybe not something I can use or sell, but at the very least I'll get to watch the sun rise or discover a submerged cave entrance. It's worth spending a night walking from one town to the next, just to give myself a chance to get lost in the wilds – and probably find some previously unmarked location when I do.

My rigid quest list is all but abandoned, unchecked and uncompleted, and I only feel free. I am the author of my own grand adventure, and I decide what happens next. ■

I shouldn't be able to kill a cult's worth of weirdos by kiting them

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CHAMPION OF CYRODIIL

24 hours of glorious adventure



PC GAMER VERDICT

Oblivion Remastered is a beautiful remake of a great game that leaves some very old, obvious issues untouched.

84

CLASS ACT

Inkle makes being a monster magnificent in **EXPULLED! AN OVERBOARD GAME**

By Abbie Stone

As a horrible person, I was delighted when I found out we were getting another *Overboard* game. *Overboard* was a delightfully nasty reverse-murder mystery, a timeloop adventure in which each run began with you tossing your screaming husband off a cruise ship. You then had to cover up your crime by framing others, outsmarting a Poirot-wannabe, sleeping your way to success, or even killing the entire crew. I adored it.

Expelled takes the basic bones of that game's structure and sets it this time in Miss Mulligatawney's School for Promising Girls, an elite 1920s training ground for wretched entitled cretins. You're Verity Amersham, the lowly scholarship student, and you've just been framed – possibly – for smashing a stained glass window. Oh, and shoving another girl out of it. You have until the end of the school day to clear your name, frame someone else, and/or discover why this happened in the first place.

That's immediately a more knotty collection of mysteries than *Overboard*'s nice clean premise of 'you've given your spouse a permanent bath, now get away with it'. Each loop starts at 7.30am with that window smashing and the girl taking a tumble. To start with you can flee the crime scene (probably wise), or hide a crucial bit of incriminating evidence (probably wiser), or even just mill around waiting for someone to catch you (er...).

TIME PENALTY

Whatever you choose will carry a time penalty, whether it's exploring the school, talking with other students or teachers, or even just checking how your hair is doing in a mirror. It's a point-and-click game at heart, a pretty one too, just with an extra layer of time pressure. It gets stressful, particularly in the early runs where you have no idea what you're doing, watching time mercilessly deplete towards that expulsion deadline.

Being a schoolgirl, Verity also has a lot less power and agency than *Overboard*'s black widow. Authority figures constantly drag me to locations I don't want to waste my

precious time visiting, bad behaviour is punished with essentially 'bad points', and I can't seem to kill anyone. Boo!

With every loop you learn more about each character's schedules, when crucial items

can be obtained and the benefits of lobbing a hockey stick out of a shattered window. Oh, but it'll smack that poor girl who's already fallen out of the window in the head, rapping me with some badness points!

Learn the benefits of lobbing a hockey stick out a window

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Detective game where you have to solve and cover up the crime

EXPECT TO PAY
£13

DEVELOPER
Inkle

PUBLISHER
Inkle

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5 12500H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4060

MULTIPLAYER
No

STEAM DECK
Yes

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2963890/Expelled/a

But it turns out, you want those points. There's precious little good karma to be found here, and your bad points persist between runs. Once the penny dropped that *Expelled* wanted me to become an asshole, suddenly this stopped feeling like an *Overboard* game in name only. Milestones of depravity are steadily reached the more your sins pile up and these in turn unlock more options for increasingly bad behaviour.

Soon I was able to sneak into unattended classrooms and, better yet, throw increasingly creative insults at stupid Fifi ("you puffed-up cockerel!"). Eventually, I was rotten enough to the core to be able to silence witnesses properly. It was wonderfully cathartic, after so many failed attempts at trying to flatter stubborn bookworm Bridget into keeping schtum, to be able to simply shove her down a staircase instead.

Getting through the day without expulsion is just the start. The game wants you to get away with the crime, stop one of your rivals becoming head girl, and even somehow snatch that title yourself. I managed a head girl run in about three hours, but even that's not the true end. You have a checklist of mysteries to pick away at, giving some welcome guidance without spelling out what you need to do.

After a slightly unfriendly start, Inkle has successfully proven the *Overboard* structure can tell a more complex story without losing the malicious glee in being a wrong 'un. A game that starts off as a slightly too accurate simulation of the frustrations of being a schoolgirl in a pompous boarding school steadily blossoms into the origin story of a horrid bitch for the ages. ■

ENEMIES AND MORE ENEMIES

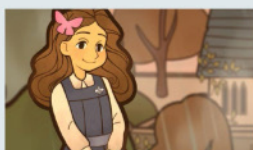
God, how we hated school...



MATRON
School nurse who apparently skipped 'do no harm'. Eep.



FIFI
Prefect and head girl-to-be who loves abusing her power.



SUSAN
Cheerful little twerp who loves tattling. Argghh!

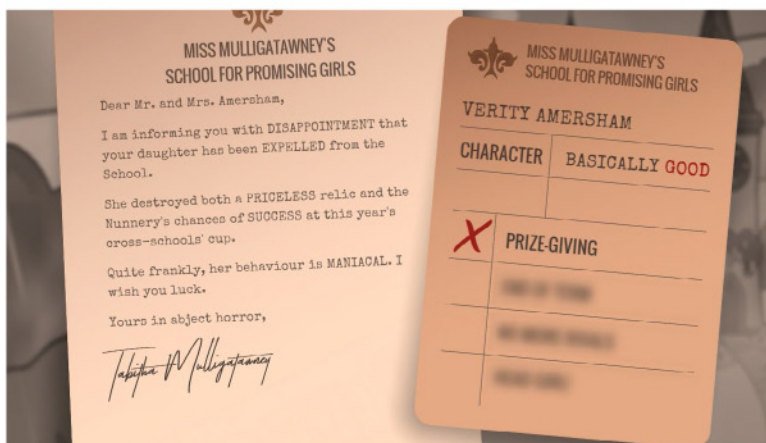


BRIDGET
Bookworm who's about as friendly as a Narnia graveyard.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Expelled, Overboard's more complex follow-up is another great evil detective game for you to explore.

80



ABOVE: The more bad behaviour you commit, the more freely you can explore the school.

BELOW: The headmistress seems suspiciously keen for you to find a way out of this jam.



SHADES OF GREY

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33 is hamstrung by real-time additions to its combat system

By Justin Wagner

You know how comedy geniuses and chronic dieters will say their favourite brand of chips is 'dangerous', because once you rip open the bag it's a swift trip to the bottom? That's sort of me with JRPGs; these games demand you live in them for a while, slowly fostering a bunch of level one nobodies into god-killing besties, and I'm susceptible enough to that demand I go into JRPGs prepared to get lost in them, love them and succumb to them.

Games like *Kingdom Hearts* and *Xenoblade Chronicles* etched lifelong preferences into my brain with their showy visuals, wild worlds, and massive casts. *Clair Obscur's* offbeat take on Belle Époque France promised blockbuster action, a cast of brooding sorcerers to mould into an apocalypse prevention squad, and a battle system that cleaves to genre standards while infusing them with twitchy QTEs and a dang gun I can fire in real time.

Even more tantalising was its premise, which is so convoluted it's hard to explain concisely. Every year a mysterious figure called the Paintress marks a giant tower with an increasingly low number, and everyone who's that age dies. Fantasy France has been sending expeditions to her base to figure out what's going

on beneath the shadow of a magically warped Eiffel Tower, but none of them have returned. The latest of these squads, my squad, are mostly 33, and in the apparent final year

of their lives. It's superlatively French and I've never played anything quite like it.

It's a sombre, swashbuckling tale of loss with lots of surprises along the way, and the strong performances

throughout bolster a plot which thrives on novelty – though too slight and short to amount to much more.

Clair Obscur oozes flair, and voice acting by the likes of Andy Serkis and Jennifer English (who you might know as *BGIII's* Shadowheart) adds a lot of punch to its lengthy cinematics. Though its splashy combat UI isn't quite as extravagant as *Persona* or *Metaphor: Refantazio*, it's clearly

A sombre, swashbuckling tale of loss with lots of surprises

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A French take on the JRPG with stunning visuals and a sombre story

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Sandfall Interactive

PUBLISHER
Kepler Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
[steampowered.com/
app/1903340/
Clair_Obscur_
Expedition_33](https://steampowered.com/app/1903340/Clair_Obscur_Expedition_33)

cribbing from the best. Rapid QTEs and glowing swords dance in tandem with flashy particle effects and emphatic slow motion, giving otherwise ho-hum hacks and slashes the drama of a flying trapeze routine. When protagonist and sword-mage Gustave fires off a fully charged volley of red lightning and quips, "For those who come after," as a reward for perfect QTE timing, it feels like the final act of a play I wrote just by killing a random goblin.

It's rare a turn-based game rolls out the red carpet so lavishly, reaching for narrative catharsis while I grind hordes of identical ghoulies into EXP. *Clair Obscur's* commitment to the vibe drew me in at first, but it quickly piled on real-time parries, dodges, counters and other mandatory distractions that left me wondering if it might be more fun to gawk at than play.

DODGEPODGE

I admit I've started to doze off grinding mobs in *Dragon Quest* before, and spicing up a turn-based battle system with a pinch of real-time challenge theoretically primed me to lock in a bit more. I think that's what *Clair Obscur* is going for when it takes a pretty familiar loop – queue up spells and attacks, guzzle potions to manage health and mana, make it to the next checkpoint without dying – and adds a lethal ultimatum: dodge or parry the majority of enemy attacks or get melted in a handful of turns.

It certainly adds some tension, but so would balancing a beach ball on my nose while I speed down the highway. In practice, every overworld encounter becomes an uphill climb where pattern memorisation is the crux of the action. These attacks are tricky to dodge; some make use of gratuitous slow motion while others don't. The game slowly introduces new types which must be jumped over, and more still which must be countered with a different button.

THESE TWO

Unlockable characters to play with

MAELLE

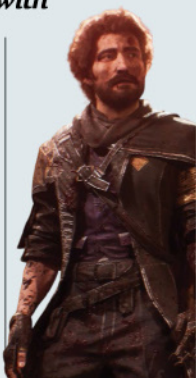
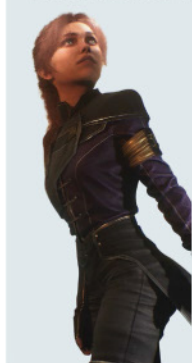
Swing for the fences, or just swing a sword as this fencer.

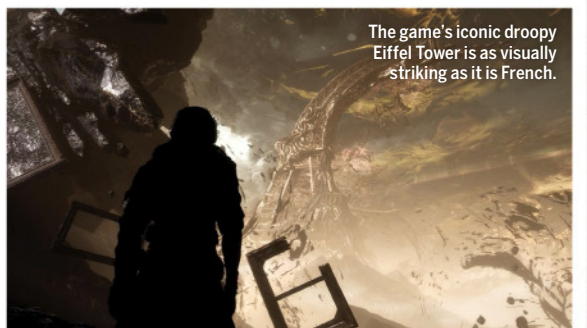
Maëlle's far younger than the other party members, so she's not staring death down the barrel like her companions. Not when you can reload saves, anyway. Stay in her Virtuoso stance to dish out absurd damage.

GUSTAVE

Few battlemages are better off than the ones with prosthetics that shoot lightning.

Gustave loses an old flame to the gommage, and his journey to stop the Paintress is more personal than most. In combat, he shoots bursts of lightning out of his arm.





The game's iconic droopy Eiffel Tower is as visually striking as it is French.

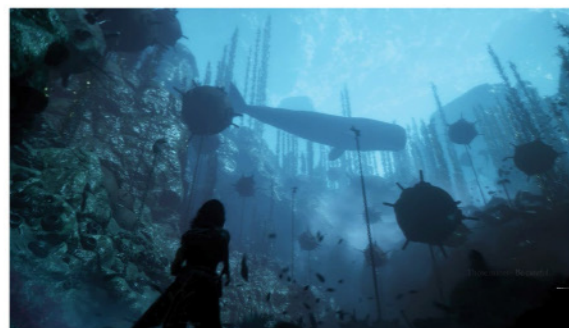


FAR LEFT: Few corners of *Clair Obscur's* UI spare you any spectacle.

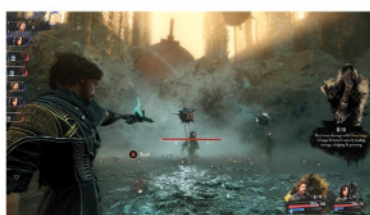
LEFT: The overworld is linear, but stuffed with enemies and mini-levels to explore.



The world of *Clair Obscur* is doomed. It's up to you to save it.



RIGHT: If it looks like you should shoot it, you probably should.



BELOW: The combat UI is an absolute looker, taking notes from Atlus' best.



Attributes screen for a character at Level 1. The screen shows a character portrait on the left and a list of attributes on the right. The attributes are: Vitality, Might, Agility, Defense, Luck, Health, Attack Power, Speed, Defense, and Critical Rate. Each attribute has a value and a description. The screen also shows a 'Recast 0/1' button and a 'Back' button.

Attribute	Value	Description
Vitality	0 - 0	Increases the character's health pool.
Might	0 - 3	Increases all damage dealt.
Agility	0 - 0	Makes the character play more often.
Defense	0 - 0	Reduces incoming damage.
Luck	0 - 0	Increases the chances of dealing critical hits. Critical hits deal 50% more damage.
Health	150	
Attack Power	48 - 51	(18 - 22 / 1)
Speed	212	(200 - 12 / 1)
Defense	0	
Critical Rate	8%	(5% - 2% / 1)

Recast 0/1

Back

Stats are easily reallocated with a plentiful resource, so no need to bust out the wiki.



It feels like *Clair Obscur* is deliberately trying to trip you up sometimes, and when some of its boss fights drag into multiple phases over dozens of minutes – often introducing new attacks right at the end – losing party members to a handful of failed dodges and getting sent back to the start is a drag.

One common overworld enemy is the ghost of a deep sea diver lugging around a naval mine. There's some immediate counterplay I can leverage: if I spend some mana on a Free Aim shot at his mine, it'll do massive damage to the whole pack of enemies, and previous encounters have taught me his elemental resistances. But his signature attack calls down a delayed lightning strike with a narrow dodge window. If I perfectly parry, I'll get a sliver of mana, and if I fail, I almost instantly die. Nearly every fight I wasn't overlevelled for cranked up the stakes to noxious thresholds this way – nail the dodge timing for the chance to proceed as normal or it's back to the last checkpoint.

Git gud, right? I'd accept that reproach for a lot of games, but the trial-and-error rote memorisation needed to reach credits frustrated me not just because it was constantly demanding, but because it drowned out the fantastic turn-based core.

Character playstyles are radically different from one another; Monoco plays a bit like *Final Fantasy*'s blue mage, collecting enemy attacks and empowering them at the whim of a

constantly spinning wheel, while Maelle is a stance-dancing fencer who struggles to stay in a fleeting Virtuoso stance that triples her damage. I grew attached to the cast and struggled to choose my party of three because I found each character so much fun. But as I tried to line up different status effect combos and

outfit my team with different passives to complement their strengths, I never got much feedback.

It's easy enough to get your party dishing out 9,999 damage regularly – the cap for most of the game – and

while I struggled on nearly every boss fight, I never overcame them by adjusting my strategy. I always won because I memorised their animations and parried at the right moment every time.

The real-time half and the turn-based half feel at odds, even if there are ways they serve each other. I admit it's fun to discover a secret weak point with the Free Aim shot or parry a flurry of attacks, flooding my mana pool with more than I could possibly spend in a turn. But because the game punishes a missed dodge so harshly and all I got for tightening my strategy was slightly shorter fights, it feels optimal to walk into any given battle with the intent to lose, memorise the enemy's attacks, and return to slap them around.

Clair Obscur ultimately seems uninterested in my build altogether, sometimes feeling more like a rhythm game with a JRPG awkwardly stapled onto it.

Character playstyles are radically different from one another

GROWING PAINS

Clair Obscur bills itself as an evolution of the JRPG, but beyond its surreal world and changes to combat, it's mostly business as usual, albeit streamlined. Exploration is split between a sprawling overworld map and smaller, self-contained zones and enemies slowly patrol your path to the nearest objective waiting to be trounced. These encounters can be safely avoided for the most part, though you're likely to fall behind on levels if you avoid everything. That said, there's hardly a grind in this game, partially because there are no random encounters, and partially because it's astoundingly short for an RPG, clocking in at around 20 hours.

The streamlining continues in the world of inventory and party management; that is to say, there barely is any. Instead of buying or looting potions, you have a limited supply that replenishes each checkpoint. You accrue weapons that scale with different stats and passive-granting Pictos, each of which are easily swapped and reallocated between fights. It's all frictionless, with the emphasis staying on the battles and cutscenes.

That's what leaves me in a tough spot with *Clair Obscur*. The world and characters charmed me. The big goofy balloon man flying my party around not-France. The tragic and convoluted story of the Paintress. It's all strange and arresting, really baguetting a double-take in a sea of games starring anime teenagers getting their decide on.

The score ping-pongs between swelling orchestras, roaring electric guitars and '80s pop, and every environment I explored was different from the last. I feel like I should be eager for another adventure in this world, but the majority of my time was spent wrestling with its battle system, undermined by real-time additions that feel like solutions in search of a problem. My affection for everyone in *Expedition 33* was drowned out by the exhaustion I felt keeping them alive. Even as short as the game is, I sighed a breath of relief when it was finally over. ■

THESE TWO TOO

Unlockable characters to play with



SCIEL

There aren't many gambits bolder than taking on monsters with playing cards as your weapon.

A card-wielding sorceress, Sciel's abilities swap her attunement between the sun and moon. In rare instances where you're attuned to both, you can expect ludicrous damage.



MONOCO

This enigmatic, monkey-like shapeshifter.

Monoco is easily the weirdest character. By collecting enemy feet, he can shift into them and use their abilities. The catch is, he's got a magic wheel dictating which of his skills are at full potential on each turn.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Clair Obscur's gorgeously realised world is let down by its emphasis on combat, marred by a few fatal stumbles.

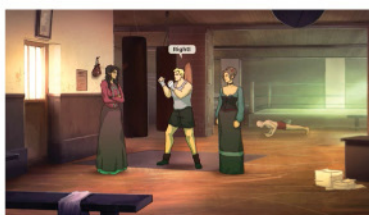
70



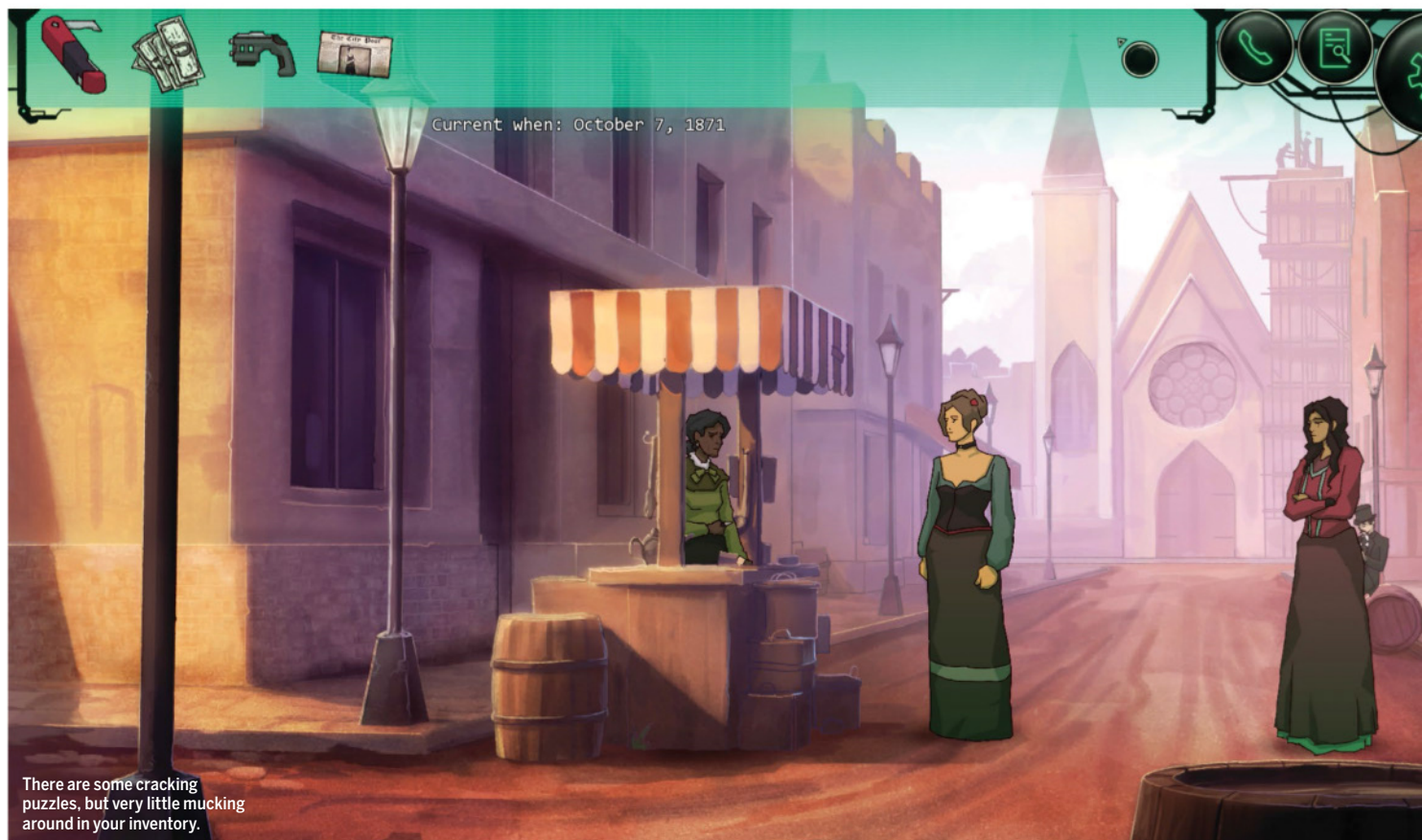
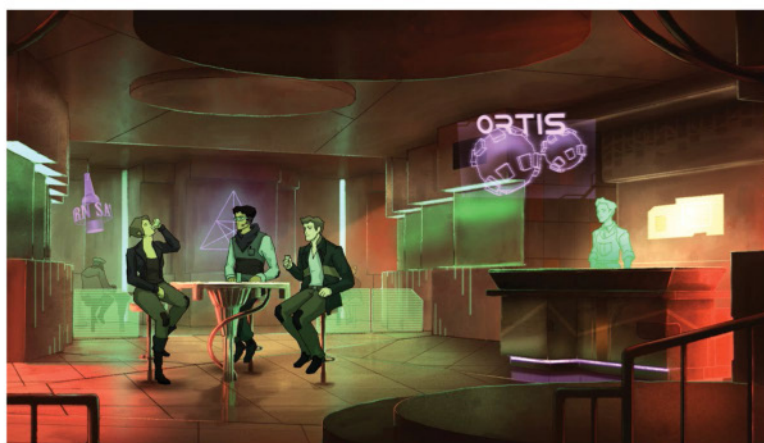
Fia's pistol is deadly, but it hardly ever works.



RIGHT: Through the magic of time travel you can visit exotic places like sweaty New York gyms.



BELOW RIGHT: The time travel jumpsuit might not be fashionable, but it will stop you from melting.



Current when: October 7, 1871

There are some cracking puzzles, but very little mucking around in your inventory.

TIME CRIMES

OLD SKIES is a beautiful adventure about love, loss and time travel in NYC

By Fraser Brown

Time travel is perhaps the most deliciously compelling of all the sci-fi conceits because it taps into something so incredibly human and primal that we're all burdened with: regret. By turning back the clock, we can fix all of our mistakes. A better version of our lives is just one time jump away – at least in Wadjet Eye's brilliant new adventure game, *Old Skies*.

Not for Fia Quinn, though. A ChronoZen agent in 2060s New York, she serves as guide, bodyguard and fixer for tourists with enough money to book some time in the past. In this tantalisingly close future, she gets to watch people make their time tweaks, and all the changes they create just wash over her.

See, like her fellow ChronoZen agents – and important historical events, people and even buildings – Fia's chronolocked. This means she's unaltered by the changes to the timeline. Everything changes around her, but she's always the same Fia – immutable, diligent, lonely and dedicated entirely to the job.

And it's a job that comes with complications. Sometimes clients go rogue. Simple missions might get tangled up in mysteries. And then there's the risk of getting shot in the head – something that happens repeatedly. It's a good thing her handler, Nozzo, always has a finger hovering over that rewind button.

Old Skies' conundrums are not the sort of thing that'll lead to your own head wounds, as you smash your face against the keyboard. Logic and common sense will keep you moving forward at a good clip, most of the

time. But the puzzles are also frequently tactile and playful, and crucially they don't forget that you're a time traveller.

One of my favourites sees you trying to save your own life in 30 minutes by

creating a life-saving drug that doesn't exist yet, using ingredients that have ceased to exist. Like most Wadjet Eye games, especially those created by Dave Gilbert, the puzzles are fun rather than challenging. But the end result is largely the same: I always feel incredibly satisfied.

STORYTIME

The art, puzzles and jazzy score all contribute towards this being another feather in Wadjet Eye's cap, but I found myself even more smitten than usual this time, elevated as *Old Skies*

Old Skies slowly grows into a cohesive story of love, loss and regret

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A time-hopping adventure game set in NYC

EXPECT TO PAY
£17

DEVELOPER
Wadjet Eye Games

PUBLISHER
Wadjet Eye Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
wadjeteyegames.com

is by the potency of the writing and the large cast's performances. Gilbert's adventure games have never let me down in this regard, but this feels like a notable leap forward.

The missions initially have an anthology-like vibe – each a discrete adventure set in a different era, but always in New York. They are examinations of human nature, but equally stories about the changing face of the city that Gilbert has spent his career depicting. These aren't really our stories, though. Like Fia, we are observers and facilitators.

But *Old Skies* slowly grows into a cohesive story of love, loss and regret that started to punch me in the gut. There were a few points where I simply had to stop playing for a wee bit to regain my composure.

My heart shattered into a million tiny pieces as I listened to her recite her mantra, "Focus on the job," after she'd once again had a chance at a sliver of happiness mercilessly ripped away from her by another change in the timeline. Rather than devolving into melodrama, Sally Beaumont's understated performance is uncomfortably real – you can feel Fia's composure and experience as she tries to move on.

Her journey from composed workaholic to tragic hero chips away at all the sci-fi gizmos and macguffins until you've just got this incredibly heartfelt story. Too many time-hopping adventures get lost in the high-stakes, sci-fi nonsense, but *Old Skies* is far more interested in familiar, evocative human stories, finding the root of what makes time travel such a gripping concept, and then keeping that at the heart of everything. It's beautiful, sad and one of my favourite adventure games. ■

QUANSONIC 101 A brief history of time travel

2041

Eggheads discover the Quansonic particle, which exists outside of spacetime.

2045

Time travel is invented, allowing scientists to create gateways to the past (and people to meddle with it).

2052

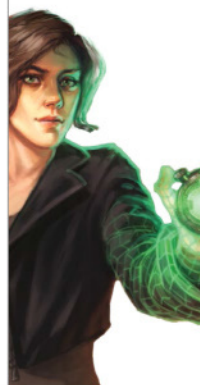
Shocker! This causes a bit of chaos, and ChronoZen is established to regulate time travel.

2053

ChronoZen establishes timeline rankings to protect important people and events. Sorry, no killing baby Hitler.

2062

The events of *Old Skies*.



PC GAMER VERDICT

Wadjet Eye Games' *Old Skies* is a new adventure game classic, and a bit of a tear-jerker. It comes highly recommended.

87

Hazel's journey leads her to neighbours who can't always save themselves.



DEEP SOUTH DELIGHT

SOUTH OF MIDNIGHT weaves a compassionate tale through American Southern folklore

By Andrea Shearon

Not long into playing *South of Midnight*, I had to stop and take a moment. Not because I'd taken offence to its portrayals of the American South – that's something you learn to brace for growing up in Mississippi – but the opposite. The Southern Gothic action-adventure had me feeling woefully sentimental over its attention to the smallest details, and its compassionate protagonist, Hazel Flood, is the perfect embodiment of Deep South born and raised.

South of Midnight isn't a few hours of kitschy antebellum aesthetics, sanitised bedtime stories, or exploitative violence. It's a supernatural tale with magic powers and creatures, but that doesn't stop it from being an earnest, empathetic look at that often forgotten stretch of land between eastern Texas and the Atlantic seaboard by a team that truly gives a damn.

Hazel's violent encounters with angry spirits from the region aren't difficult, but they are fun – I especially liked the sequences where her only option was to run (lest the past catch up to her). The action isn't

the main attraction, though. It's the distinctly Deep South details that really affected me, like the familiar blare of severe weather warnings, some decaying infrastructure, and an ensemble of characters carrying generations of grief.

Share the pain, then stitch whatever remains back together

In the first few chapters, the game introduces Hazel's abilities as a Weaver. The fights don't have much depth, and Hazel sort of meanders between smaller enemies in oversized arenas. Thankfully, the slower transition isn't very long, and her weapons make for something more thematically interesting.

Hazel's kit is an ethereal arsenal

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Southern Gothic action-adventure inspired by Deep South folklore, superstitions and history

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Compulsion Games

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 9800X3D,
64GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
compulsiongames.com

of beloved trinkets, like a childhood doll and literal bottle to capture emotional pain. Along with her enchanted Hooks, those knickknacks are an important part of the Weaver responsibility. Wielding one in each hand, Hazel rips through enemy Haints – angry spirits spawned by a trauma-fuelled rot known as Stigma.

It's not enough to destroy the sources of Stigma's roots, but you can't really fix everything, either. A lot of Hazel's journey is about wrestling with that. Acknowledge the hurt, share the pain, then stitch whatever remains back together.

It's a process leading to plenty of encounters with broken people, sometimes easy to hate and hard to love. It's grounding, really. It's given me this feeling I can only describe as what must be the videogame equivalent of a warm embrace. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

South of Midnight's action isn't its strength, but the poignant tale of Deep South mythos keeps its head held high.

83

BROKEN BEAUTY

THE LAST OF US PART 2 REMASTERED is a feature-rich iteration on an imperfect game

By Justin Wagner

If you were around for the release of *The Last of Us*, you'll remember that it felt like a watershed moment for the medium. There had been plenty of good videogame stories before, but few with such good performance capture as to draw comparisons with film and prestige television. *The Last of Us Part 2* came out in a different time, seven years after the first game sent its waves through the industry.

Performance fares well enough the first few hours on my RTX 3060 Ti with the opening's snowy landscapes only harried by a texture bug here and there, but once I got to the game's iconic cityscapes the lack of optimisation became more obvious.

There's often stuttering when encountering dense areas for the first time, there are more frequent texture glitches as foliage struggles to pop in, and the otherwise stable framerate ails in particularly busy scenes.

The new features in the remaster are mostly in line with Sony's other ports, offering ultrawide support, HDR, more graphics options and better accessibility options. They're all welcome additions that make this version feel definitive.

There are two gameplay additions as well: a place to freely play Ellie's guitar and No Return, a roguelite mode in which players trawl through a series of randomised combat encounters earning weapons and upgrades as they go.

The meat of it is getting wheeled from set piece to set piece

STORY MORALS

The Last of Us Part 2's story is well-built enough; it's superbly acted, scored effectively, and is the rare videogame with a keen eye for a good camera shot. That said,

the script itself has some unignorable issues; its portraits of ugly violence are empathetic, but it also makes some cynical assumptions along the way, carrying the baggage of a implicit metaphor which undercuts any nuance it might have had.

Exploration is rewarding when

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The remastered sequel to a legendary survival-horror adventure game

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Naughty Dog, Nixxes Software, Iron Galaxy Studios

PUBLISHER
PlayStation Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-12700F, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

STEAM DECK
Verified

LINK
naughtydog.com

the player is cut loose to scramble for bullets and crafting materials, but the meat of it is getting wheeled from cinematic set-piece to set-piece. Characters loudly pontificate about the next objective, which usually involves finding an object or NPC and pressing E. It's a fine vehicle for Naughty Dog's cinematic storytelling, but the frequent prompts are blunt and artificial in ways *TLOU2*'s rich stealth action isn't

On the flipside, combat encounters are fun as ever. Brawls and gunfights are frantic and thrilling, deciding on your feet whether to spend precious bullets or risk getting a lethal bite in melee.

All told, I can appreciate *The Last of Us Part 2* for its storytelling and audiovisual splendour, but with this port giving me the regular troubles that it does, No Return is the only aspect I see myself returning for. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A rough port and bungled narrative make it hard to recommend, though the remaster's additions and action satisfy.

60



Bring a friend! It might just save your life.





IN THE FRAME

EPHEMERAL FRAME takes photobombing to another level

Growing up watching Narnia has made me look at paintings in a different way: as potential portals to other worlds, if you happen to catch them on a good day. *Ephemeral Frame* has, remarkably, captured that feeling, by turning portal fantasy into a clever puzzle mechanic. Just click on a photo, as you explore these worlds in first-person, and you will instantly be transported to the world inside the frame.

The game starts off in a series of abstract environments reminiscent of *Twin Peaks*' red room, and it's already an interesting puzzler as you hop inside stationary picture frames to collect photo fragments. But there are more exciting worlds out there, and seeing a photo of a busy street, or a poster for a rock concert and instantly stepping inside it is almost as impressive as *No Man's Sky*'s seamless atmospheric transitions.

At first, it's merely a tool for getting around. I want to get into the cinema, but the place is currently closed. Perhaps if I click on this flyer that's been hung up outside it (complete with a photo of the cinema's interior), I might be able to

– yep, that's amazing, I'm now inside the cinema. More excitingly, the lobby has a couple of posters – other worlds – hung on its walls, even an enterable film reel projecting a sci-fi flick on the cinema screen.

The best puzzle games are the ones that emerge from thinking deeply

Pretty soon you're given the camera, which takes the excitement up another notch. Now you can take your own photographs and enter them whenever you want, which is useful for returning to

previous areas and even earlier moments in time. *Ephemeral*'s smartest puzzles make use of this feature, as you take a picture of a doughnut, grab the doughnut, then hop in the picture to the moment before you grabbed the doughnut, in effect giving you infinite doughnuts.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A game where you step inside photographs to solve puzzles

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Tsunscreens

PUBLISHER
Tsunscreens

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/EphemeralFrame

SNAP-HAPPY

Because of course that would work, if you think about it hard enough. The best puzzle games are the ones that emerge from thinking deeply about a mechanic, following it where it leads, and it has led to this puzzle game.

Pretty soon you're given the fishing rod, and then the game is just showing off. Why the hell do I need a fishing rod in a game about photographs? Hang on, but I've been looking for fish. And what if I... no, they can't mean... damn, it worked.

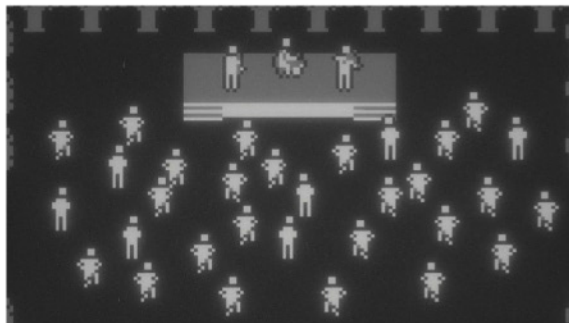
The usual strengths and weaknesses of the free game apply: this is concise, with not an inch of fat, but its ideas have not been explored to their full potential. But the game has captured the thrill of that Narnian magic, reframing the world in that way that is curiously unique to puzzle games. Whether or not it is expanded down the line, *Ephemeral Frame* is something special. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A good puzzle game heightened by an exceptional premise that never feels less than magical.

87

BELOW: Stick around long enough at this concert and you'll join in.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Devin P. Quinn

LINK
bit.ly/DullAcres

TREE-MENDOUS

Dull is not how I would describe **DULL ACRES**

I started *Dull Acres* wondering which way to go, trying to keep track of where I had been, and where I had not. That's very much not the point of this game about wandering around a forest, where you should just follow your feet to see where they take you.

Dull Acres is essentially a series of encounters, as the little protagonist trudges from screen to screen and finds similar stick-people in various dire, strange or funny situations. I happened upon a concert, swapped places with a peculiar tree and met some unlucky people that were dragged into the trees by some sort of monster. I found people philosophising about their fates, I encountered beautiful things and creepy things, as I gave up on reaching a destination and as the forest gradually shifted around me.

In such a repetitive environment, the encounters need to be memorable, and they certainly are here. There are bespoke animations, which are more expressive than the screenshots might lead you to believe, and the writing is thoughtful, concise, and often very funny. Absurdity is hard to do right and it's the shared dilemma of the forest's inhabitants that binds their sad, sweet and strange vignettes together.

It's helped by the impeccable vibe of the game, by the chill music as you traipse around and the walk speed that is just the right side of slow. Just as it's on the verge of losing your interest, *Dull Acres* pulls out the next encounter. I would have liked more of an ending. Instead, the world abruptly runs out of stuff for you to do. But don't let that stop you venturing into the woods. ■

78

TIME OUT

Watch how you use that thing in **UNTIME**

Bernard's Watch this is not. Instead, a magical pocketwatch that can control time has landed into the wrong hands – yours. Will you use it for good or... OK, it's evil. You'll use it for evil. Without spoiling too much, you have found a new, dark use for the power of time travel.

After an event from your past takes you out of your hometown and to an unfamiliar city, you have to go about your daily business, walking to your job at a local bookshop and cleaning it up while your boss has a go at you for being late. A run-in with a mysterious character brings the pocketwatch into your possession, although it's a while before the timepiece reveals its power.

It's always interesting to see how story-focused games portion out or cordon off their interactivity. You

don't control the pocketwatch here, or the grim actions of the protagonist, but you do steer them between story beats and sometimes mop up spillages in the bookshop. In a way, it's an odd choice, to make such a menial part of the story interactive, but your job adds a structure and rhythm to the narrative that makes the sudden turn the story takes all the more shocking.

There's no way to branch the story, but it is an interesting story due to how it develops. The entire middle part of it – in which the protagonist misuses the time travel power – is told as a symbolic, horrific trudge from one end of a corridor to another.

This moment is the highlight of the game, with the twist ending not having as much weight behind it. Still, it's good to see such a facet of time travel being explored. ■

BELOW: The magical pocketwatch might actually be more deadly.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
kulu

LINK
bit.ly/UntimeGame

64

"Kids, we're nearly at Center Parcs!"



OLD FLAME

Come pine with me: going back to **FIREWATCH**

Never underestimate the power of a glum intro. It's why everyone remembers the brutal opening of Pixar's *Up*, but not the stupid monster parrot. And it's the reason that *Firewatch* is so immediately effective. By the time the game actually begins, you've made a lifetime's worth of decisions and you can feel time slipping through your fingers like the ashes of a loved one spilling from a shattered urn.

It immediately puts me on the defensive. Protagonist Henry's responses to his new boss, Delilah, are uncharacteristically spiky for me, even though it's not actually my partner who's suffering from early onset dementia.

It's a testament to how good the setup is in *Firewatch* that I'm lugging the emotional baggage that was only packed five minutes beforehand. It's also a stark, relatable introduction to the central conceit of the game. As much as it's about exploring Shoshone National Forest and, as you might expect, watching out for fires, it's also about how you interact with Delilah, the faceless voice on the other end of the radio. It's a mechanic we likely take for granted in games, but the

execution here is impeccable. It's about as conversational as games get. Perhaps it's the loneliness of the post, or the scale of Henry's surroundings, but I find myself wanting to ask Delilah about everything I stumble

I find myself wanting to ask Delilah about everything I stumble across

across. Discovering cans discarded by feckless teenagers is an exciting excuse to pour scorn on the young. And you can just imagine what effect a discarded bra had. I want to hear Delilah's response to all of these things, and her wry, derisive responses help me understand the world and characters beautifully.

FRY FRY FRY, DELILAH

Because of this, the relationship between Henry and Delilah feels like the sort of thing that belongs on

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If *The Forest* was an Alexander Payne film

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Campo Santo

PUBLISHER
Panic, Campo Santo

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700,
16 GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/383870/Firewatch

every listicle about gaming double acts. And it helps that it takes place in such a striking location. It's like being inside an Olly Moss painting, because that's exactly what it is. A place of tweeting birds, sparse piano music and distant pastel mountains. There's a gentle appreciation of nature and rural spaces in *Firewatch* that makes me wish someone would hurry up and create a VR noset set that pumps out pine-fresh forest smells. It is, hilariously, the sort of game that makes you want to stop playing and go for a gigantic walk instead. Nothing here is difficult, in terms of skill, but the emotional beats do leave a mark. And even though it's free and easy with jokes and banter, it also never feels like it's clumsily mooning to the audience. Instead, the mystery at the centre of it – one I won't ruin – plays brilliantly with the fear that comes from being alone and cut off in an isolated space. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Firewatch is unflinching, sad, funny, and frequently brilliant. The emotional equivalent of survival horror.

88

BELOW: Playing *Firewatch* has made me cagey about open fires.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£6

DEVELOPER
adamgryu

PUBLISHER
adamgryu

FEATHER REGIONS

The only way is up in **A SHORT HIKE**

There are loads of actions in games that we compulsively complete without even noticing. Reloading guns after firing one round. Checking to see if curtains are swooshy. And climbing literally anything, just because it's there. *A Short Hike* is like the ultimate final form of the desire to scamper up every surface.

It's also very much about getting back down again. In most cases this involves sliding helplessly down slopes like a toddler going the wrong way up a damp slide. I also found myself stumbling off the edge of the game's cosy precipices, delightfully unbothered about losing the progress I'd made. And this is the loveliest thing about *A Short Hike*: even though it reinvents *Breath of the Wild*'s energy-based clambering mechanic, it doesn't really matter if

you have to start again. In fact, it's positively encouraged. Winding your way back up Hawk Peak provides another excuse to explore the world and chat with its inhabitants, all of whom are charming and eccentric. It also helps that no rational human being could get angry at this game or feel any malice towards Claire, the chipper, non-specific blue bird whom the player controls. She's so single-minded in her quest to find phone reception that it's just nice spending time gently guiding her.

Then there's the gliding. It feels like a gimmick leaving this to the closing paragraph, as if everything in *A Short Hike* is just about that final moment when you swoosh back down from the top of Hawk Peak. And that's part of it. But for a game as warm as this, the real pleasure comes from talking to the cast. ■

80

MISSING LYNX

Human supremacy in **THE HUNTER: CALL OF THE WILD**

The themes this month could be birds, since they feature quite prominently in all three games, but it's actually the great outdoors. Nature. The outside-o-rama. And nothing expresses man's fragile interplay with the natural world than purchasing the most powerful rifle money can buy and shooting deer up their harmless bumholes.

It's perhaps a weird thing to say about a game that it's exclusively about all the different and exciting ways to murder wildlife, but my favourite bits of *Call of the Wild* often happen outside of the actual killing. And I say this as a country bumpkin who fired his first shotgun when he was four years old. I love the cautious, careful tracking of animals, and the way it makes you engage with the environment. I love how

focusing on a single target sharpens the mind. I even quite like identifying poo correctly. When these elements combine, it makes for an unusually slow stealth game, and one in which your own impatience is about as dangerous as most of the animals you're hunting. The amount of time you spend hunched in fronds also has an interesting effect on the moment you actually take the shot. Ten minutes of waiting in a game feels like a lifetime, so when you actually fire a weapon, it becomes as rare and valued as the Great One Whitetail you're about to kill. The result is a strange experience: one in which you learn about the habits and habitats of animals, choose the most ethically-sound ammunition you can, then wait and ponder the circle of life before ventilating a mammal with a semi-auto 20 gauge shotgun. ■

74

BELOW: Imagine hunting a duck that big. Oh, wait. Perspective.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£16.75

DEVELOPER
Expansive Worlds

PUBLISHER
Avalanche Studios



RIVEN CROWN



HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



92

GROUP TEST

Top webcams rated for quality, features and value.

98

TECH REPORT

Why did our PCs' disk drive capacities stall?

100

TECH TALES

Tips and tricks for keeping your rig cool during summer.



102

THE BUILD

A powerful gaming PC with maximised RGB lighting. Grab shades!



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget with our comprehensive guides.

GROUP TEST

WEBCAMS

Pick up a pretty webcam to kickstart your streaming career or just liven up your work calls

By James Bentley



FROM TINY 4K WONDERS TO SOLID 1080P DRIVERS, WE'VE TESTED MANY A WEBCAM



Webcams are one of those devices I always forget to think about when setting up a gaming rig. Being the best way of showing your face to friends (outside of leaving the house), it's pretty rare for your monitor to come with a little camera, and even then, I'd opt for something dedicated most of the time anyway.

They're important little devices in many a gamer's setup but can't be so expensive that most everyday users would be better off with a dedicated camera and tripod instead. From tiny 4K wonders to solid 1080p drivers, we've tested many a webcam at PC Gamer. Striking the balance between 'it shows an image, I suppose' and 'this could be used by NASA' is how you pick the best webcam for you. We've tried a bit of it all and here are six of the best.

THIS COULD BE GREAT
FOR SOME, LIKE ARTISTS
OF ALL KINDS



GROUP TEST

MX Brio

LOGITECH £220

The full package

1 Alright, there's no getting around the fact that the Logitech MX Brio is quite expensive, and 4K quality video is certainly a bit of a niche. I mean, do you really need it? However, if your answer to that question was a resounding yes, then here you get a slick plug-and-play webcam that is super easy to use, looks great, and is made even better with Logitech's own smart software.

You don't need a dedicated mic to come through clearly with the Brio thanks to its twin beamforming mic and its settings menu is well explained and simple. It is worth noting again, though, that £220 is a lot of

money and you can get the OBS Meet 2 for much less. The Brio does have some rather niche options, like a show mode specifically intended to show your hands on a keyboard, mouse, or drawing pad. This could be great for some, like artists of all kinds, but needless for most. As well as this, it can occasionally lean a little too heavily on its software to make the final product look a little nicer. It's a good package that costs at least an arm, if not an arm and a leg.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great microphone
- Smart software
- Expensive

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 4K AT 30FPS, 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: SONY STARVIS / CONNECTION: TYPE-C

Facecam MK.2

ELGATO £110

The People's favourite

2 The Elgato Facecam MK.2 is our favourite webcam right now partially down to how easy is it to use and how natural the footage looks. It is designed for 1080p video capture and records it all uncompressed, making for clean artefact-free recordings.

Though there are some 4K webcams at this still pretty expensive price point, it is worth noting that 4K video capture is definitely a niche and the MK.2 is one of the best for someone who only really needs 1080p. As well as shooting solid footage natively, Elgato's camera app is a great bit of software that gives plenty of customisation options to your

video. If you are a tinkerer who likes to tweak settings to get everything looking just right, the Facecam MK.2 is a great companion.

It is worth noting, however, that some of the Facecam's best features can only be used with an Nvidia graphics card. Nvidia's Broadcast app can give you a virtual background, more dynamic lighting, and it gets the most out of the webcam's sensor, so if you're not rocking a card from Team Green, consider that.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent software
- Uncompressed capture
- Best with Nvidia

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: SONY STARVIS / CONNECTION: TYPE-C

2



3



DO YOU REALLY NEED 4K?

No, you don't need 4K. Most apps either don't allow it natively or require you to pay for the privilege (we're looking at you, Discord). If you just want to jump on a quick call, 1080p webcams will do just fine and will cost you less too.

However, if you plan on using it for content creation, and plan to cut away to a full video of your face, a 4K

webcam can be a good investment in your video's quality. As 4K webcam choices get cheaper, the reason to go for one only gets better.

4K may not be necessary but 4K webcams have only gotten more reasonable with time, and there are a few we've tested that are so good that even running them at 1080p isn't a bad shout.

4



Cam

STREAMPLIFY £60

Streamer's choice

3 The most budget-friendly option in our entire list, this is a simple webcam that shoots 1080p footage at 60fps. That's pretty much the biggest selling point. Its recording quality isn't impeccable but it is more than enough for a meeting or quick recording. It also comes with a built-in physical privacy shield, which is a neat touch for the slightly paranoid out there (yeah, I see you, despite your webcam cover).

The lack of any kind of accompanying software does mean what you see is what you get, and it leaves little room for the quality to get better as the

software improves, as is the case with some other choices in our list. This may be a boon to some though.

Taking static photos can be a little grainy but video capture is solid here. Despite these complaints, that price point makes the Streamamplify Cam the best choice for someone looking for a cheap device for a quick meeting. A Type-C connection and a simple set-up process do make it fairly plug-and-play, which is a bonus.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Very affordable
- Easy to use
- Lack of software

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: CMOS / CONNECTION: TYPE-C

Kiyo Pro

RAZER £200

Getting lit

4 Again, £200 is quite a lot of money to spend on just a 1080p webcam. In fact, you can almost get two Meet 2s for the same price. However, in return for the financial outlay, you get one of the absolute best light sensors we've used to this day.

Webcams are a bit hit or miss when it comes to videoing in dimly illuminated environments, so Razer appears to have focused an entire webcam on solving that problem. Where the original Kiyo tackles low-light environments with a built-in Ring light, the Kiyo Pro instead goes for a truly top-notch light

sensor. However, the Kiyo Pro's autofocus isn't very consistent, the webcam's default settings aren't great, and its HDR support doesn't cut it.

However, if you're looking to shoot 60fps footage in a dark environment, no other webcam on this list is as capable as Razer's offering.

This is intended to be a bit of a streamer's choice. If your streaming cave is mostly lit by RGB, you'll be in neon heaven with this one.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Incredible light sensor
- Expensive
- Poor autofocus

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: IMX237 WITH SONY STARVIS TECHNOLOGY / CONNECTION: TYPE-C



Meet 2

OBSBOT £129

No one does it cuter

5 The cutest webcam I've ever seen, the Obsbot Meet 2 fits easily into my palm, and can produce clear 4K quality video recording at 30fps. To top it all off, the Meet 2 comes in at such a reasonable price point that it could be worth picking up even if you only plan on using it for 1080p capture at 60fps.

Though not impeccable, the microphone is passable for a meeting too, and the half-inch CMOS sensor is pretty great for most types of lighting given the tiny size. The Meet 2 is a real looker with a few different colours, which you may not expect from a 4K webcam at

this price point. The stand isn't fit for purpose, however. The top of it is magnetic, which means the webcam can wiggle somewhat. As the stand itself is quite small, this means that a light rumble will send the webcam hurtling to the ground. If you plug in the Meet 2 with a slightly heavy cable, it will never stay on its stand. The magnetic privacy cover is a nice accessory but I lost it multiple times thanks to my webcam falling off the monitor.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Adorable
- Reasonably priced
- Terrible stand

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 4K AT 30FPS, 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: HALF INCH CMOS / CONNECTION: TYPE-C

Tiny 2 Lite

OBSBOT £179

Capture everything

6 The standout feature of the Tiny 2 Lite is undeniably its gimbal. The webcam sits on a perch, which allows the entire webcam to swing around. This allows it to swing around to capture you as you walk or move around.

A decent mic and solid software make the Tiny 2 Lite great for anyone looking to get active in streams or calls. This means it's a bit of a powerhouse for doing digital presentations. The Tiny 2 Lite has an incredibly impressive autofocus, making out previously blurry hand signals and boxes in less than a second in my testing. It uses AI to register hand signals which

can change the focus or zoom in, but they are unfortunately a tad hit or miss. Wearing a pink jacket, the webcam's AI software regularly got my clothes and skin mixed up.

This meant that, sometimes, the camera would randomly zoom in or change focus and give no indication as such in meetings. This inconsistency is a problem in a daily driver. Sorry, participants of my meeting, I didn't mean to zoom into my face.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Gimbal works well
- Fast autofocus
- AI is hit or miss

SPECS MAX CAPTURE: 4K AT 30FPS, 1080P AT 60FPS / SENSOR: HALF INCH CMOS / CONNECTION: TYPE-C



GROUP TEST

**THE TINY 2 LITE HAS
AN INCREDIBLY
IMPRESSIVE
AUTOFOCUS**

Data centres don't like the risk of going beyond 16TB per drive.

Image credit: Getty

STORAGE WARS

Why did our PCs' disk drive capacities stall?

A young(er) Bill Gates said, "640K ought to be enough for anybody," about the IBM PC's memory back in 1981 while onstage at a computer conference. Or at least, that's how the story goes. Firstly, it's impossible to imagine the Microsoft cofounder as truly young. Some people seem to be born aged about 48, and Gates is among them. Secondly, nobody seems to remember precisely which computer conference this took place at, or the precise quote. In fact Gates himself now claims he never said it.

But let's not let the truth get in the way of a good maxim, and that's how the pace of change quickly makes boasting about specs sound foolish. 640KB of information, as we know now, was not enough for anybody. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Moore's Law held firm, and as computing equipment made its way from foreboding beige laboratories to the home, its specs and capabilities escalated dramatically. By the time Windows 95 arrived, users needed an astronomical 4MB of system RAM to run it, and upwards of 55MB of hard disk space.

And we all know what happened from there. Between 1995 and 2015, the componentry inside our precious home computers became dramatically more powerful each time manufacturers iterated a new generation. Numbers that

would have seemed like pure sci-fi quickly became affordable and attainable hardware specs: 1GHz of processing power. A terabyte of storage.

READ/WRITE, REPEAT

But here's the thing: if you'd have said "2TB of SSD storage ought to be enough for anybody" back in 2015, you'd... still be pretty much on the money in 2025. Having enjoyed that quiet revolution brought about in the 2010s when SSDs arrived and showed us how much faster flash storage is than its clunky mechanical hard disk counterpart, things subsequently settled back down to a plod. If you shelled out on 2TB of NAND storage ten years ago, you might have had subsequent opportunities to upgrade to a faster M.2 drive, or to have picked up the same capacity with slightly better read/write speeds for less, but you've hardly been outmoded by the pace of change.

It's not like the demands on our storage have remained static over that period. Back in 2015, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III* needed 60GB of territory on your storage device to unfurl all its suspect Russian accents and weapon attachments onto. In 2024, *Black Ops 6* wanted 102GB of it. And it's not just *CoD* that wants more space – it's increasingly common for games to ask for 100+GB now, since they generally add more uncompressed audio and other capacity-intensive assets into install packages.



Go big or go home

If you're curious about the biggest SSD ever made, look no further than Solidigm's preposterous D5-P5336. Built to beat ExaDrive's longstanding record with 100TB on a 2.5-inch SSD, the Solidigm manages 122.8TTB. It's priced well over £10,000 so don't expect to see it in our build guides any time soon.



FAR LEFT: Why don't we all have one of these? Just the small matter of its £10,000+ price tag.

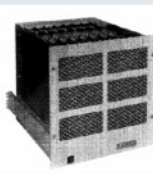
LEFT: CoD wants all your SSD space. All of it. Every year. It must be stopped.

LESS IS MORE *Four historic drives they thought we'd never fill*



IBM 305 RAMAC

The first 1MB hard drive cost a million dollars and weighed more than 2,000lbs when it arrived in 1956.



DATARAM BULK CORE

Introduced in 1976, the world's first SSD had a massive 2MB capacity, and the coolest name a drive's ever been given.



SAMSUNG 32GB NAND

In 2006 Samsung changed the game with a mass market, 32GB SSD, featuring 57MB/s and 32MB/s read/writes.



HITACHI DESKSTAR 7K1000

The world's first 1TB disk drive, released in 2008 for you to put all the 480p movies you illegally downloaded onto.

So if games are asking for more capacity and SSD storage is becoming gradually ever-cheaper, why aren't SSD manufacturers giving us more of it in one drive? That would mean we don't keep having to play game install *Tetris* on our existing drives, cramming games in wherever they'll fit, uninstalling and reinstalling the games we swear we'll finish once we get the time. And surely many of us would pay for that.

The simple answer is that we probably wouldn't pay as much for that convenience as it actually costs to manufacture more capacious flash storage drives. Because, paradoxically, in a broader sense there's not enough demand for high capacity solid state storage. Let's just lay that out again: demand for bigger SSDs is curbed by the fact there's not much demand for them.

Before your brain starts dripping out of your ears, let's unpack that. Whatever's going on down here in the enthusiast market, ultimately manufacturing costs are informed by larger scale business customers. And for the companies whose services depend on vast storage – Netflix, for example – there's not much demand for a single-drive solution, because the more data you store on one drive, the more disruptive it is when that drive fails.

FAIL SAFE

Data centres tend to use a mix of mechanical disk drives and flash storage, preferring the former for 'cold' storage of archival materials and backups that aren't accessed frequently, and the latter for a data cache of 'warm'

storage, brought through from the mechanical drives, that's accessed more frequently.

16TB seems to be the maximum capacity that companies are willing to risk as a warm storage device, due to the complexity of engineering controllers and caches of DRAM to manage all the memory cells, not to mention the disruption and cost of losing 16TB of data in one failed drive.

That dampens demand for 16TB solid state storage, which means it's manufactured at a smaller scale.

Which, of course, means the manufacturing cost is more expensive than the 2TB drives that are manufactured at a larger scale, even before factoring in the additional expenses of more memory cells and more complex controllers essentially capable of much higher throughput.

THERE'S NOT ENOUGH DEMAND FOR HIGH CAPACITY SOLID STATE STORAGE

ENTHUSIAST MARKET

And that explains why more capacious options haven't trickled down to the enthusiast market. While 2TB drives in either 3.5-inch SSD or M.2 format are generally pretty affordable and priced under £200 in many cases, the cost of going 4TB or higher quickly enters enterprise territory.

At Computex 2024, Chinese manufacturer AGI promised an upcoming 16TB PCIe SSD, but didn't announce a price for it, and the drive has subsequently not reached the market yet. There are options available for north of £1,000, but their limited availability suggests they're not flying off the shelves. Until someone like AGI finds a way to undercut that pricing, we're all stuck playing game install *Tetris* for a while longer. ■

Phil Iwanik

COOL RUNNINGS

The annual quest for optimal PC performance in stuffy summer heat

Summertime's a conflicting proposition for the individual whose passions generally take place in an RGB-lit chamber where the soft whirr of case exhaust fans is a constant. On one hand, all that vitamin D's going spare outside. You could be soaking it up for free and decalcifying your winter brain, daring to imagine a life beyond pressing the boost button on the central heating and letting the next episode of *Succession* autoplay while you warm your hands on a mug of Twinings English Breakfast.

On the other: the screen glare. The suffocating heat of sitting near a box full of red-hot componentry. The guilt of pulling the curtains and ignoring nature just beyond them so that you can better pick out the D.Vas and Genjis on your monitor. And above all: the system temps. Warm ambient temperatures don't make for great framerates or system stability. That's been true for as long as this writer's been PC gaming, and until recently mine was a strategy of quiet resignation, simply leaving the most GPU-intensive titles for a cooler day. But not this summer. No, this time I vowed to do whatever I could to keep my PC's temperatures low during the summer months.

THE BIG CHILL

Step one was to find a decent, reliable and free way of checking how hot things were getting inside my case. CPUID's venerable HWMonitor and HWInfo64 are both decent options, but this time I opted for Libre Hardware Monitor, a utility that shows not just various temps, fan speeds and voltages, but also allows for some easy custom displays so you can check the correlations between different elements. And this was a very useful first step indeed, because even before I started running *Phantom Liberty* with 12 different ReShades applied to it, I could see that my whole system was running a bit warm.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU TOOK A OF CAN OF COMPRESSED AIR TO YOUR PC?

That led to an obvious step two: a summer spring-clean. To be honest with you, I hadn't been keeping on top of the dust accumulation inside my case for years, nor had I reseated my CPU since lockdown, or given much thought to how efficiently my cables were tied up for optimal airflow. Cleaning out the dust, applying some new thermal paste, and keeping my cables as tucked away as possible would surely bring my idle temps down – I just needed to measure by how much.

When was the last time you took a of can of compressed

air to your PC? Not recently enough, is the answer. Displacing that dusty grey buildup with a jet of air is one of life's great joys, a level of satisfaction that's almost transcendent. You can pick up a twin-pack for about £5, too. I combined the air-clean with a quick go-around with an anti-static microfibre cloth, stood back in quiet delight at the aesthetic improvement, then performed a quick

cooler re-seat with some fresh thermal paste.

According to Libre, that labour was worth a whole degree and a half. A decent return if you ask me, and perhaps it was this which set my expectations irrationally high about what kind of returns I might get from cable-tying my internal connectors in a slightly neater manner. The upshot was that this endeavour counted for exactly zero temp drop. You live and learn.

Time, then, to load the most demanding game I play: modded *Skyrim*. A precarious house of cards comprising 300 mods, numerous reshade presets, an ENB, custom launch commands and some very aggressive downsampling. Before I had a tidy-up, I was logging 90+ degree temps in Whiterun. Gulp.

CASE CLOSED

Post-clean-up, I was back down to sub-90. But not by much. Without thinking much about it, I removed the side panel from my PC case and opened a window, just out of



PHIL IWANUK
Airflow-obsessed freelancer Phil has taken to parking below the PCG offices in his 1989 Ford Escort Cabriolet. We refuse to look down at him, no matter how many times he honks.

GETTING HOT IN HERE *Four things that send your internal temps soaring*



DUST

Letting dust accumulate on your componentry is like putting it in a fur coat made of lint and your dead skin. Best avoided.



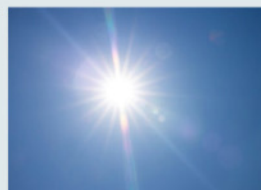
POOR AIRFLOW

It's not just internal cables that affect this. Inadequate space outside the case for hot air to escape is also a major contributor.



A BROKEN FAN

It's not always immediately obvious when this happens, since their blades are so silent these days. Use an app to monitor temps.



SUNLIGHT

If you've got beams hitting your tempered glass panel, your GPU's going to feel like an ant under a magnifying glass.



ABOVE: Reseating your CPU with fresh thermal paste: minimal cooling gains, surprisingly.

curiosity. What I observed was a ten-degree drop in load temps. Ten of them. Ten whole degrees.

Short of submerging the entire system in a mineral bath, fresh air might be the biggest performance and reliability boost I could have given my PC. It's prompted me to consider an open chassis case build. Maybe just for the summer. Maybe permanently.

CSFG specialises in open air cases, and while models like the wall-mounted Frostbite ITX case are pricey (£399) the glass cover does provide some protection from accidental damage, which is the only real downside of the format. It might seem like dust would accumulate more, but in reality there's much less buildup than accumulates in a traditional case. There are cheaper options, like StreaCom's DA6 and numerous AliExpress options probably crafted from used razor blades. I probably won't go for them. Probably.

Whichever open-air chassis I opt for, though, I'm excited. I might have finally found a solution to the summertime BSODs, system hangs and frame drops that dogged my system for years. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



Sensor	Value	Max
DESKTOP-DK9KJH		
HP 2336		
Intel Core i3-5010U		
Clocks		
Bus Speed	99.8 MHz	99.8 MHz
CPU Core #1	798.2 MHz	2095.4 MHz
CPU Core #2	798.2 MHz	2095.4 MHz
Temperatures		
CPU Core #1	56.0 °C	71.0 °C
CPU Core #2	54.0 °C	67.0 °C
CPU Package	56.0 °C	71.0 °C
CPU Core #1 Distance to TJMax	49.0 °C	58.0 °C
CPU Core #2 Distance to TJMax	51.0 °C	60.0 °C
Core Max	56.0 °C	71.0 °C
Core Average	55.0 °C	69.0 °C
Load		
CPU Total	11.7 %	100.0 %
CPU Core #1	10.9 %	100.0 %
CPU Core #2	12.5 %	100.0 %
Powers		
CPU Package	8.0 W	14.0 W
CPU Cores	2.2 W	10.2 W
CPU Graphics	0.1 W	0.3 W
CPU Memory	0.0 W	0.0 W
Generic Memory		
Load		
Memory	56.1 %	91.0 %
Virtual Memory	74.5 %	90.4 %
Data		
Memory Used	4.4 GB	7.2 GB

LEFT: Unrivalled airflow, but also unprecedented levels of risk if you spill your tea on it.

THE BUILD

RGB everywhere

By Jacob Ridley



TOTAL COST £2,118

1

MEMORY



Vengeance 32 GB DDR5-6000
Corsair **£154**

Dual-channel memory? Yes, but with a twist. I've opted for a pair of 16 GB sticks of Corsair's speedy Vengeance RAM here, as that's enough to make the most of the two channels available on this system. These sticks are rated to 6000 MT/s, which is right at the level that

AMD recommends for use with its latest Ryzen chips. But is that four sticks? It is, and the other two are just empty shells with pretty lights attached. They're what Corsair calls its Light Enhancement Kit and, yes, they're a vanity project, but we're not above that here.

2

MOTHERBOARD



B850 LiveMixer WiFi
ASRock **£200**

There's something appealing about the glossy silver styling of the LiveMixer, and it has tons of Type-A USB slots.

3

CASE



Frame 4000D
Corsair **£70**

Buying into the iCUE ecosystem means we need a case to match, and I've opted for the latest Frame 4000D.

4

GRAPHICS CARD



Mercury AMD Radeon RX 9070 XT Gaming Edition with RGB
XFX **£743**

This graphics card is so big it has its own gravity field.

5

PROCESSOR

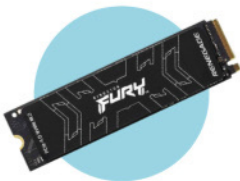


Ryzen 7 9700X
AMD **£285**

Since I blew all my budget on fans that light up, we're ditching 3D V-Cache for the more affordable 9700X.

6

SSD



Fury Renegade 1 TB
Kingston **£80**

A drive with speeds up to 7300MB/s used to mean an expensive PCIe 4.0 SSD, but it's more affordable today.

7

POWER SUPPLY

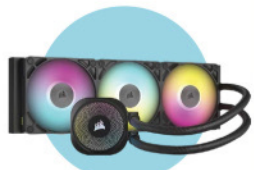


RM850x
Corsair **£148**

A unit that has seen a few upgrades, including the latest connections for Nvidia graphics cards.

8

COOLER



x iCUE Link Titan 360 RX LCD
Corsair **£218**

The latest trend in coolers is to slap a screen on it to show some key stats.

9

FANS



LX120-R RGB and LX120 RGB
Corsair **£220**

These reversed fans blow air in a different direction for better aesthetics.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

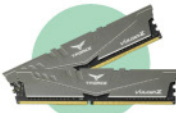
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,070

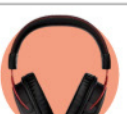
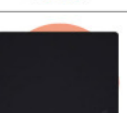
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £140 Intel's budget chip is still fantastic value and a solid all-rounder
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £300 AMD delivers what we need for a 1080p gaming PC at a solid price, at least until new budget GPU competition arrives
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 8 GB of RAM is simply not enough these days, but 16 GB of speedy DDR4 is much more like it.
POWER SUPPLY		RM650 80 Plus Corsair £80 A great power supply is a must, and Corsair builds some reliable workhorses. This one's a good balance of price and power.
SSD		SN770 1 TB Western Digital £75 It's time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive, even for a budget PC. You'll appreciate the extra speed and fast boot times.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £150 This BenQ is proof you can buy a genuinely excellent 24in 1080p gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: a hot-swappable USB mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G305 Lightspeed Logitech £30 Even on a budget you can still grab a fantastic, ultra-rapid wireless squeaker like this one here.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £50 Corsair's budget wired cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.
MOUSE PAD		MM100 Corsair £10 A simple black rectangle that can make a world of difference over no-name models, and it's almost as cheap, too.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,678

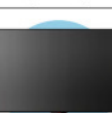
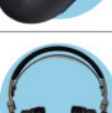
MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B650-E Asus £160 A reliable motherboard with plenty of frills, including Wi-Fi 6E, 2.5Gb Ethernet, PCIe 5.0 for the SSD and USB-C on the back.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 7700X AMD £315 For the longevity offered by the AM5 socket, we're going for AMD's excellent eight-core Ryzen 7.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £440 While GPU stocks dwindle and the new cards are still at silly prices, we'll continue to opt for AMD's cheaper card for now.
COOLER		Peerless Assassin 120 SE Thermaltake £35 It's a big beast, but it brings cooling performance to the table that's undeniably impressive.
MEMORY		Viper Venom DDR5-5600 16 GB Patriot £59 It might not have fancy RGB lighting, but this Patriot RAM certainly has the speed you need for less.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 750W Be Quiet! £104 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with PCIe 5.0 connectivity. At 750W, there's room for a GPU upgrade too.
SSD		NM790 1TB Lexar £90 The Lexar proves you can, sometimes, have it all: blazing speeds, cool operation and a great price.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		PXC277 Advanced Pixio £200 The price of this Pixio, considering the 1440p resolution and 165 Hz refresh rate, is quite something.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £55 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £40 This Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £60 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.
MOUSE PAD		G440 Logitech £20 This low-friction hard-top mouse pad with minimal branding offers the smoothest of glides for a reasonable price.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£6,542

MOTHERBOARD		MAG X870E Tomahawk MSI £300 With support for four M.2 drives, huge amounts of DDR5, Wi-Fi 7 and more, this mega mobo is specced to the hilt.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 7 9800X3D AMD £450 The upcoming Zen 5 top-end X3D models will have more cores, but for gaming this is the bee's knees.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 5090 Nvidia £2,800 RTX 5090s are at ludicrous prices right now, but this is a money-no-object build and it's still the fastest GPU you can buy.
COOLER		Galahad II Trinity 360 Lian Li £150 Lian Li's Galahad is all about pure liquid cooling performance and it delivers this flawlessly.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £115 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1300 Seasonic £420 The RTX 5090 is a thirsty beast, so you'd better give it a serious power supply – and this one's similarly monstrous.
BOOT DRIVE		NM790 4 TB Lexar £250 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
MOUSE PAD		Firefly V2 Pro Razer £100 Do you need an RGB mouse mat? If it makes you feel any better it's excellent for flick shots.
CASE		5000D Corsair £139 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		ROG Swift OLED PG32UCDM Asus £1,200 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Strix Scope II 96 Wireless Asus £180 We're keyboard snobs, and we can say with confidence that this full-sized Asus board is about as good as it gets.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V3 Pro Razer £118 This is the best gaming mouse in our opinion, made better by an incredibly lightweight frame.
HEADSET		Maxwell Audeze £320 Planar magnetic drivers make this headset pure heaven for audio fans. And everyone else, to be honest.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“You play as the blue-skinned agent of an unspecified organisation”

BETRAYAL AT CLUB LOW is a bite-size RPG that feels like the future

For a long time, I knew of *Betrayal at Club Low* by reputation alone: a game ‘like *Disco Elysium*’ with exploration, skill checks, dice, all that jazz. *Betrayal at Club Low*, I apologise. I wasn’t really familiar with your game.

I made the mistake of checking out the demo for developer Cosmo D’s upcoming game, *Moves of the Diamond Hand*, first. This is an artist who’s only getting better at their craft, and the new game has the makings of an indie classic.

Even with its similarities to *Disco Elysium*, it distinguishes itself mechanically. The knockout blow is Cosmo D’s surreal, anarchic sensibility. *Betrayal* and *Diamond Hand* both feel like half-remembered Adult Swim shows caught at 3am

TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Became the finest gourmet DJ in Off-Peak City.

ALSO PLAYED
Parking Garage Rally Circuit, Baldur’s Gate

that I never learned the name of, but also can never forget.

CHAD BLUEPRINT FOREVER

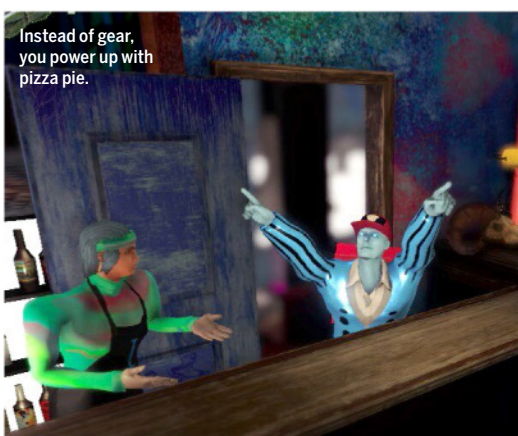
In *Club Low*, you play as the blue-skinned agent of an unspecified organisation, sent into the titular discotheque to extract an undercover comrade having a risky meeting with an underworld heavy. Your cover is that you’re the pizza guy.

In addition to rescuing your buddy, there are a number of side objectives that can make the main mission easier, or even preempt

unforeseen complications that crop up along the way: show up a mediocre DJ, befriend the club owner, merge consciousnesses with the security system, steal a jacket, make a delicious gumbo. All these interconnected goals play off each other in interesting ways and can lead to multiple endings, lending *Club Low* to extensive replays.

You build your pizza guy from seven skills: cooking, deception, music, observation, physique, wisdom and wit. None of them feel like the game winner or essential first-playthrough choice. Rather, they each have moments to shine, and a

THIS IS AN ARTIST WHO’S ONLY GETTING BETTER AT THEIR CRAFT



well-balanced build can see most of the game in a single run thanks to roll-modifying statuses, contingent bonuses and save scumming.

My main picks were cooking and music my first time through, but I think next go around I'll try for a canny beefcake built around physique and wit. There's also an entire system of bonus-providing craftable pizzas you can bake with ingredients scattered throughout the club, but this is a system that only seems to be really coming into its own with *Diamond Hand*.

I have to mention the music: *Club Low*'s subject matter speaks to an underground music fixation on the part of Cosmo D, and this is the rare game soundtrack that I keep coming back to. So much electronic, synthy music I run into these days just feels corny, but *Club Low*'s OST is decidedly not that. Moody, dancey and surprising, it propels the action and exploration from the word go.

So yeah, I'm kind of in love. In addition to the upcoming *Diamond Hand*, Cosmo D also has a back catalogue of adventure games on Steam and itch.io set in the same Off-Peak City setting, so I'll have plenty to chew on until *Diamond Hand*'s release. ■



“I just want to do some sightseeing”

Taking in the sights in **ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS**

▶ DANIELLA LUCAS



THIS MONTH
Skipped the story and enjoyed the sights

ALSO PLAYED
Final Fantasy XIV, *Atelier Yumia*

Like many people I really want to go on holiday to Japan to enjoy nerdy pursuits in Tokyo and take in some sights in Kyoto. I last went more than eight years ago, but with the state and cost of everything these days it's unlikely I'll get the chance to go back anytime soon. Luckily *Assassin's Creed Shadows*, with its gorgeous take on feudal Japan and attention to detail, is here to help me scratch that travelling itch. Heroes Naoe and Yasuke might be out for revenge, but I just want to be a tourist.

Kyoto is packed with temples both in the game and real life, so I set out on a little tour to the historic versions of places I could go see today. I started with Nijo castle which is a huge walled complex surrounded by a moat. The real thing is surprisingly intact and open to the public to take in the old halls, though the main towered building burned down and only a large walled base is visible. However, in-game you can see it in all its glory as it would have been, though you'll have to assassinate a few Daimyo to enjoy it fully.

Next I moved onto Kiyomizu-dera – a site with a gorgeous temple and several shrines nestled along a hill. It's famous for the views of cherry blossoms in Spring and bright Autumn foliage. This one actually looks remarkably similar to how it stands today, though with way fewer crowds and people getting into your photos so I could just sit and peacefully enjoy the views.

TIME TRAVEL

Other famous places, such as the Inari shrine with its hundreds of red Torii gates don't exist here as they weren't built yet in the late 1500s, though Gion does exist – just not in its current form. A district known for its Geisha and ancient streets today, it was just a normal town once as it is here. It's fascinating to see the roots before famous places came to be.

I finished my tour with a stroll through the bamboo forest of Arashiyama which is a million times more lush than the real thing. While I might not get to go on that holiday anytime soon, being able to see historical versions lovingly recreated in-game helps me appreciate just how much these places have endured and changed over time. ■



“The neighbours who turned into teeth creatures I had to bash to death”

I've done awful things in **LOOK OUTSIDE**, but I didn't look outside

The inexplicable cosmic event in survival horror RPG *Look Outside* is like an eclipse – you shouldn't look at it, but people do anyway. At which point they start transforming into body-horror monsters, covered in eyeballs or teeth or with their skin turned inside out.

Our hero did not look outside and has to survive the 15 days before someone turns the sky off and then on again to get it back to normal without leaving his apartment building. His apartment building, which is full of people who did look outside and are now turning into practical effects from a David Cronenberg movie.

Like Rafta, the lady who lives in the pipes. I can't see what she's turned into but she seems friendly enough, as some of the monsters do. Not the neighbours who turned into teeth creatures I had to bash to death with a baseball bat via the medium of turn-based JRPG combat, but the ones who come to my door at night when I'm trying to get my hit points back and offer to trade some items.

Rafta wants a pen and some

JODY MACGREGOR



THIS MONTH
Gazed into the abyss.

ALSO PLAYED
Warhammer 40,000: Darktide, *Gnomes*

stationery to write a love letter to Nestor, a rare apartment-dweller who, like me, did not look outside. I happily scrounge the items for her in between my daily runs to steal food out of people's fridges so I can cook it back at home, and even convince Nestor to visit the creepy pipe room where Rafta hangs out.

At which point she emerges from the pipe as an elongated tapeworm thing and climbs inside Nestor's eye. The transformed wormy monster they become attacks, but during the fight its head, hands, and feet all separate and escape, leaving me to

RAFTA WANTS A PEN AND SOME STATIONERY TO WRITE A LOVE LETTER TO NESTOR

wallop just a torso with the frying pan I upgraded too.

PIPE DREAM

Following a trail of blood, I find where the head has fled. It's beelined for the apartment where another non-monstrous neighbour has set himself up as a shopkeeper, doling out bullets and medicine. Before I have time to intervene, the wormy severed head attacks him, bulging as it devours shopguy's face. And then it turns to ask if I'd like to buy anything. I could tell you I destroyed that monster just to end his misery, but I was also thinking about the fact I'd be able to loot the shop when it was dead. There was a lucky tie and a shotgun, as well as ingredients I can craft into Molotov cocktails.

That's not the worst thing I've done in *Look Outside*. The event affected animals as well. And when a spooky wall face demanded to be fed a child, I gave it a rat baby. In return it vomited out one of the discs I need to open doors locked by spooky cultists, so it was all worthwhile. I may not have looked outside, but maybe I have become a monster, but isn't that always the way? ■



FAR LEFT: On the plus side, that's a spacious bathroom.

LEFT: Everybody needs good neighbours.



“I have no idea what’s happening, but I’m having the time of my life”

LIKE A DRAGON: PIRATE YAKUZA IN HAWAII fills that Saints Row void

Ex-Yakuza Goro Majima and I are a perfect match, he has amnesia and I’m almost entirely blind to the rest of the *Yakuza* (*Like a Dragon*) series. But, if you’re open to whatever *Like a Dragon: Pirate Yakuza in Hawaii* throws at you, you’re in for a wild ride. After more than 30 hours I can’t wipe this maniacal grin off my face. It hurts, I have no idea what’s happening, but I’m having the time of my life.

I’m not too proud to admit I miss the puerile simplicity of *Saints Row* before its more recent reboot – which wasn’t as awful as it was broken, but had absolutely lost its magic; showing mere flashes of the *Row* I used to know. It’s one of the franchise deaths I’ve mourned the most, burying sparks of brilliance and missed opportunities. They weren’t profound masterpieces, but *Saints Row* was pure comfort food that leant into its signature brand of bonkers, unbridled (occasionally bridled) fun, and had a strong identity. Until it didn’t.

EMMA WITHINGTON



THIS MONTH
Snapped shots of men in iridescent pants

ALSO PLAYED
Split Fiction, *Cryptmaster*

Enter *Pirate Yakuza*, as earnest as it is irreverent, a game that doesn’t take itself too seriously in all the right places. In a stonker of an intro – something 2022’s *Saints Row* sorely missed – Majima flexes his chops in a Disney-style musical number on board his ship the Goromaru.

BOOTY ROW

I know the idea of roving gangs that embody the golden age of piracy is barmy, but I buy into it regardless. From rallying a rag-tag crew of

salarymen, mascots, and... ‘Nickelle Kidman’, to cruising around Hawaii on a Segway – I veer wildly off course into side stories. I can’t even get on the Waikiki Trolley without being dazzled by an unsettlingly mesmerising crystal crotch in ‘pervy *Pokémon Snap*’ (*Sicko Snap*) – one of the best and most absurd activities since Insurance Fraud. I have questions, but I don’t need answers. Honestly, the most unbelievable thing is that Majima is 60 years old. Come on now, that’s truly ridiculous.

It’s a reminder that, sometimes, things aren’t that deep and there’s a place for arcadey fun that puts the wind back in your sails with nitro speed and laser cannons. Dress like a vampire or drag queen, summon spectral sharks with musical flair, and accept that Hawaii’s food is delivered by someone with wild eyes and a Cheshire Cat smile that could conceivably kill you. I’m having the most fun I’ve had since the *Row*’s golden era and all it took was the promise of ‘Fast and Furious at sea’, but I’m staying for the incredible bounty it has on offer. ■

I’M NOT TOO PROUD TO ADMIT I MISS THE PUERILE SIMPLICITY OF SAINTS ROW

OVERWATCH 2

The new perk system has saved the day. *By Elie Gould*

It's been two-and-a-half-years since Blizzard introduced *Overwatch 2*. It was meant to be some grand new venture into the next stage of this hero shooter's life, changing up the game and bringing players more interesting features to explore and enjoy.

But instead of marking the next stage of the hero shooter's evolution, the sequel has fallen into a bit of a sluggish routine over the last couple of years, releasing seasonal battle passes every few weeks, alongside a new hero or map every now and then. It didn't feel particularly inspiring, but I carried on playing, mostly thanks to habit with a bit of the sunken cost fallacy sprinkled in.

It wasn't until *Marvel Rivals* that I found myself breaking the habit of playing *Overwatch 2*. This new game couldn't compare to *Overwatch 2* in polish, but it was refreshing to play a hero shooter that wasn't scared of throwing new features together and adding ridiculous yet fun heroes into the mix. But just when my *Overwatch* hourly numbers were at an all-time low, Blizzard announced something new, which would arrive during Season 1: hero perks.

Perks were added mid-Season 15, without a test weekend, a separate

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE October 4, 2022	DEVELOPER Blizzard
PUBLISHER Blizzard Activision	LINK playoverwatch.com

game mode, or any of the usual safety checks for new features. It felt like a bit of a knee-jerk reaction to *Marvel Rivals* muscling in on *Overwatch 2*'s space, but these features had been discussed years beforehand.

PERK UP

The perk system was initially meant to be a part of *Overwatch 2*'s promised PvE experience and had even been discussed during BlizzCon 2021 as part of a skill tree system which explores new hero traits. But instead of coming with PvE, it was introduced as a separate, smaller feature, which would be integrated into quickplay and competitive.

Every hero now has four perks. Throughout a game, you earn XP for kills, assists, healing and more, which goes towards your perk meter and once it fills up, you get to choose between two minor perks at level one, then once you get to level two, you get to choose between two major perks. This means that by the end of the game, every player should have one minor and one major perk,

which can change their hero's abilities and features.

Some of my favourites include D.Va's Shield System perk, which converts 150 health to shield and lets the Defense Matrix restore said shields based on 25% of damage absorbed, Ashe's Viper's Sting perk, which provides 25 extra damage and reloads two ammo after hitting two consecutive scoped shots, and Ana's Shrike perk which gives nano boost to Ana as well as her intended target. These perks may seem small, but they can actually make a massive difference to how matches play out.

If I'm playing Ana during a chaotic match where I need to be

SOME OF MY FAVOURITES INCLUDE D.VA'S SHIELD SYSTEM

closer to the frontlines to keep my team up or am constantly dealing with annoying flankers, then the Shrike perk can be a lifesaver as it increases my damage output considerably and makes me less squishy. However, if I'm in a more relaxed game where I can hang back safely behind my team, then I'd pick the Headhunter perk, which allows me to crit enemies with headshots.

Most heroes can decide between boosting their defensive or offensive capabilities, which adds a little bit more customisation and gives players some more control over matches.

It may seem small, but I'm really thankful that the devs implemented this system when they did. *Overwatch 2* was really beginning to show its age against youthful competitors, and it seemed like it was just going to coast into the night without much of a fight.

Instead, the new perk system demonstrated that *Overwatch 2* can throw players curveballs with no warning, and without the worry that changes will completely topple everything that the devs have been working towards over the last few years. The next stop on this experimentation run will likely be the new Stadium mode, which will bring a third-person round-based format with a MOBA-like store to the game. It's a mouthful, but after perks, I'm looking forward to another change. ■

LIFESAVERS *Must have perks*



ORISA PROTECTIVE BARRIER

Javelin Spear is replaced with a barrier.



ASHE VIPER'S STING

Hitting two consecutive shots on a target reloads two ammo and adds 25 extra damage.



PHARAH DRIFT THRUSTERS

Pharah can move while ulting.



REAPER DIRE TRIGGERS

Reaper can fire a volley with long-range accuracy from both Hellfire shotguns.



ANA SHRIKE

Using Nano Boost also casts it on Ana.



MERCY CHAIN BOOST

Secondary fire links to a second nearby ally.



FAR LEFT: Orisa's major perks, Charged Javelin or Protective Barrier.



Juno running through her Hyper Ring.

I think the monster went thataway.



MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

Make your adventure even wilder with mods. *By Christopher Livingston*

Monster Hunter Wilds hasn't had the warmest reception on PC. Sure, it's sold millions of copies and it's just about the best game you'll find about hitting dinosaurs with giant hammers, but there have been plenty of technical problems along the way. Visit its Steam page and you'll see Capcom's open-world action game hasn't pulled out of its reviews nosedive, with a score of 'Mixed' and about a 65% approval rating since its launch in February.

Unfortunately modders can't fix everything, but they're always willing to give it their best shot, aren't they? Dozens of mods popped up the same day *Monster Hunter Wilds* launched, and that was just the beginning as expert enthusiasts began creating performance tweaks, gameplay

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 27, 2025

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

LINK
monsterhunter.com

changes, quality of life fixes, and plenty more.

Before you get to installing mods, you'll need to install mods that let you install mods. Your first stop is REFramework on either Nexus Mods or GitHub, and make sure you carefully follow the instructions there – thankfully, it's pretty easy to set up. You should also grab Fluffy Mod Manager (also from Nexus Mods) which will make installing and uninstalling mods a pretty simple drag-and-drop affair.

If performance has been an issue for you, try *Special K*, by Kaldaien, which you'll find on GitHub. This utility was created for *Nier*

The truest pain of all.



Change your kitty's looks whenever you want? Yeah!

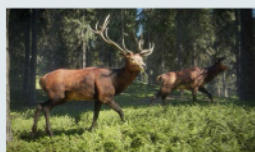
WILD HUNTS

Here are more great hunting games



THE AXIS UNSEEN

Grab a bow and hunt legendary creatures in a sprawling heavy metal world bigger than *Skyrim*.



THE HUNTER: CALL OF THE WILD

No monsters here, just animals with realistic behaviour.



HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

Aloy's got lots of tricks and traps to bring down her prey, which just happen to be robot dinosaurs.



RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Lots to hunt, but as you probably already know, there's gonna be a lot hunting you right back.



ABOVE: More on-screen info saves you from digging through the manual.

RIGHT: They don't need a health bar, but you could give them one.



Automata and can be used on a whole bunch of PC games, *Monster Hunter Wilds* included. It won't fix all your performance woes, but it may improve frame-gen and you can also use it to set a framerate limiter that often works better than the ones you find in-game.

BATTLE READY

If you'd like a bit more info on the monsters you and your companions are fighting, try the *MHWilds Overlay* mod or the *Monster Weakness Icon Indicator* mod. The first shows you a monster health bar and other stats about the damage you're dealing during a fight, if you're looking to take some of the mystique out of combat. The second mod will display a monster's weakness so you don't have to stop what you're doing and look it up yourself.

Famously, Capcom charges players to change the looks of their hunters and palicos. If that doesn't sit right with you, a mod called *Unlimited Character and Palico Edits* does just that: you change your character and your cat as much as you want. Once you've got it installed, you can load the character creation screen from the main menu and make as many tweaks as you like. One caution: a few players said they were banned for using it.

If you're looking for a workaround for some other of Capcom's systems, you'll probably want to give the *Item Cost Tweaks* mod a look. "Buy for 1z sell for 999999zz" is this mod's tagline, so it's not bashful about it being a big 'ol money cheat. But hey, not everyone wants to spend time working out a budget and painstakingly crafting items, some of us just want to fight monsters. Another mod called *Infinite Consumables* will save you a ton of crafting time, too: when you use ammo, potions or traps, the quantity in your inventory will not decrease.

FASHION SHOW

At the end of the day, *Monster Hunter Wilds* isn't just about hunting monsters, it's about hunting fits. The endgame, the real endgame, I mean, is fashion. Thankfully, there are a few mods designed to smooth out a couple of interruptions to your endless pursuit of drip.

Bufs are important for hunters, but sometimes you might not want the literal glow-up they give you.

You're trying to look like a deadly badass but you just plugged a drink that's made you glow a bright orange. Your outfit looks great but you clash with the distracting green glow of healing. Swords, bows, hammers, they all glow. Being infected, being cured of infections: more glow. It's kind of a lot.

Let me point a non-glowing finger over to the *Persistent Buff Glow Removal* mod by PeaslyWellbott, which suppresses a laundry list of glowing effects. With the mod installed you can hide glowing effects individually, or just tone them down to less obnoxious levels, or even choose to shut them all down completely. Now there'll be nothing obscuring your sweet fit.

Not everything is about utility. There's plenty of perfectly silly mods that exist just to make a fun game



SILLY MODS EXIST JUST TO MAKE A FUN GAME EVEN MORE FUN

even more fun. Continuing a tradition that dates back to 2020's *Monster Hunter World*, and then 2022's *Monster Hunter Rise*, the *I Hope You Step On A Lego* mod created by Kimchiworm continues in *Monster Hunter Wilds*. If you're not familiar with it, the mod introduces monsters to a pain most humans can attest to: stepping on a Lego brick with bare feet. The mod replaces your shock trap with a 2x2 golden Lego brick to let the monsters know the true meaning of agony. It was a great addition to *World* five years ago, and it's wonderful to see the mod pop up once more in *Wilds*.

If that's not silly enough for you, how about some really big long fleshy arms? Show the monsters who's boss with this monstrosity, the *Handy Lance* mod created by placeholder0646, which replaces the Hope lance model with a massive accusatory finger at the end of a real arm. The shield? It's also a human hand. Offputting? Yes, but necessary: what more humiliating way to bring a monster to the ground than poking them to death? That's not how I would want to go. ■



GET STARTED IN

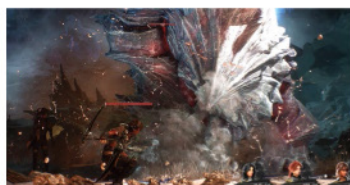
CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

Conquer the continent and defeat the Paintress. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

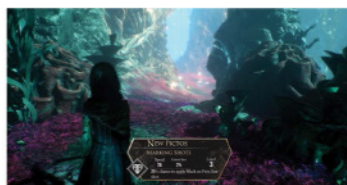
DIFFICULTY
HardTIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Expedition 33 tips:
[pcgamer.com/games/
rpg/clair-obscur-
expedition-33-tips](http://pcgamer.com/games/rpg/clair-obscur-expedition-33-tips)Quiz answers:
[pcgamer.com/games/
rpg/clair-obscur-
expedition-33-antoine-
answers](http://pcgamer.com/games/rpg/clair-obscur-expedition-33-antoine-answers)

DODGY GEEZER

1 The first thing to note about *Expedition 33* is that, despite its turn-based combat, you're going to be dodging, jumping, parrying and even countering attacks in real time. Dodging is by far the easier option, but if you parry you can earn action points to use on skills.



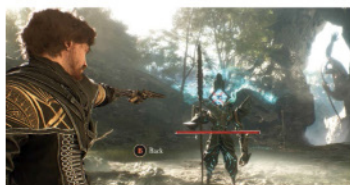
TAKE A PICTOS

2 The main way you build your characters in *Expedition 33* is by acquiring Pictos, either finding them or buying them. You can equip three of these buffs at once, offering a bump to stats, as well as a more specific effect that you can play into during battle.



LUMINA POINTS

3 Spending Lumina points is where Pictos really become powerful. Once you unlock The Curator, you can allot Lumina to each character, and then use those points to activate Pictos in the menu. The more Colour of Lumina you find, the more Pictos you can stack.



SHOOT FIRST

4 You can use your gun to shoot during turn-based combat. This has a lot of uses; you can blast a weak point, shoot enemies that dodge regular attacks, or even find a sneaky advantage during a boss fight. The only problem is that each shot costs an action point.



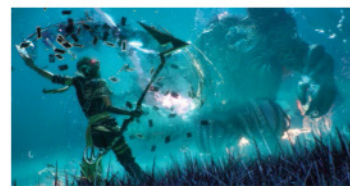
ACTION HERO

5 The real barrier to dealing damage to enemies in *Expedition 33* are Action Points; the resource you spend to perform skills. While you can get these back through parries and basic attacks, it's better to use your Pictos to acquire them.



TAKE A LOOK

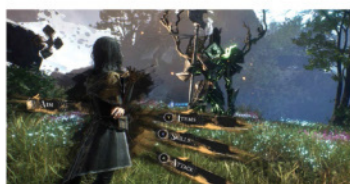
6 The best way to find new and powerful Pictos is to explore. More than many other RPGs, tackling optional bosses and side content requires you to build your power by grabbing extra Lumina points, upgrade materials and weapons.



SUPER EFFECTIVE

7 Another way to increase your potency in combat is to play into each enemy's weaknesses. Both the weapons and skills that you use have specific elements, and depending on the enemy, this might deal extra damage, be resisted, or even heal them.

MIME TIME *Take down these creepy performers*



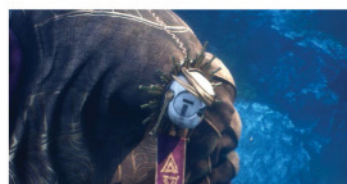
WOMBO COMBO

8 Each character in *Expedition 33* has a unique playstyle, such as Maelle's stances providing buffs. These can be devastating if you play into them, a good example of which is Maelle's Virtuoso stance combined with Percee – one of the best damage-dealing skills in the game.



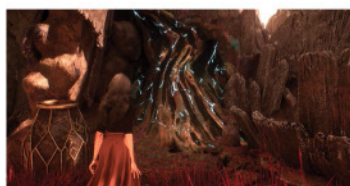
SMASH SHIELDS

9 You'll frequently find that enemies shield themselves during combat, placing a little shield icon above their health bar which will absorb all damage from one attack. To ensure your biggest hits strike home, I suggest using your free-aim gun to remove these shields.



MAKING FRIENDLY

10 While *Expedition 33* doesn't feature a romance system as such, it does have a relationship level between characters which can unlock abilities. Whenever the main story sends you back to camp, make sure to spend time with each of the expedition members.



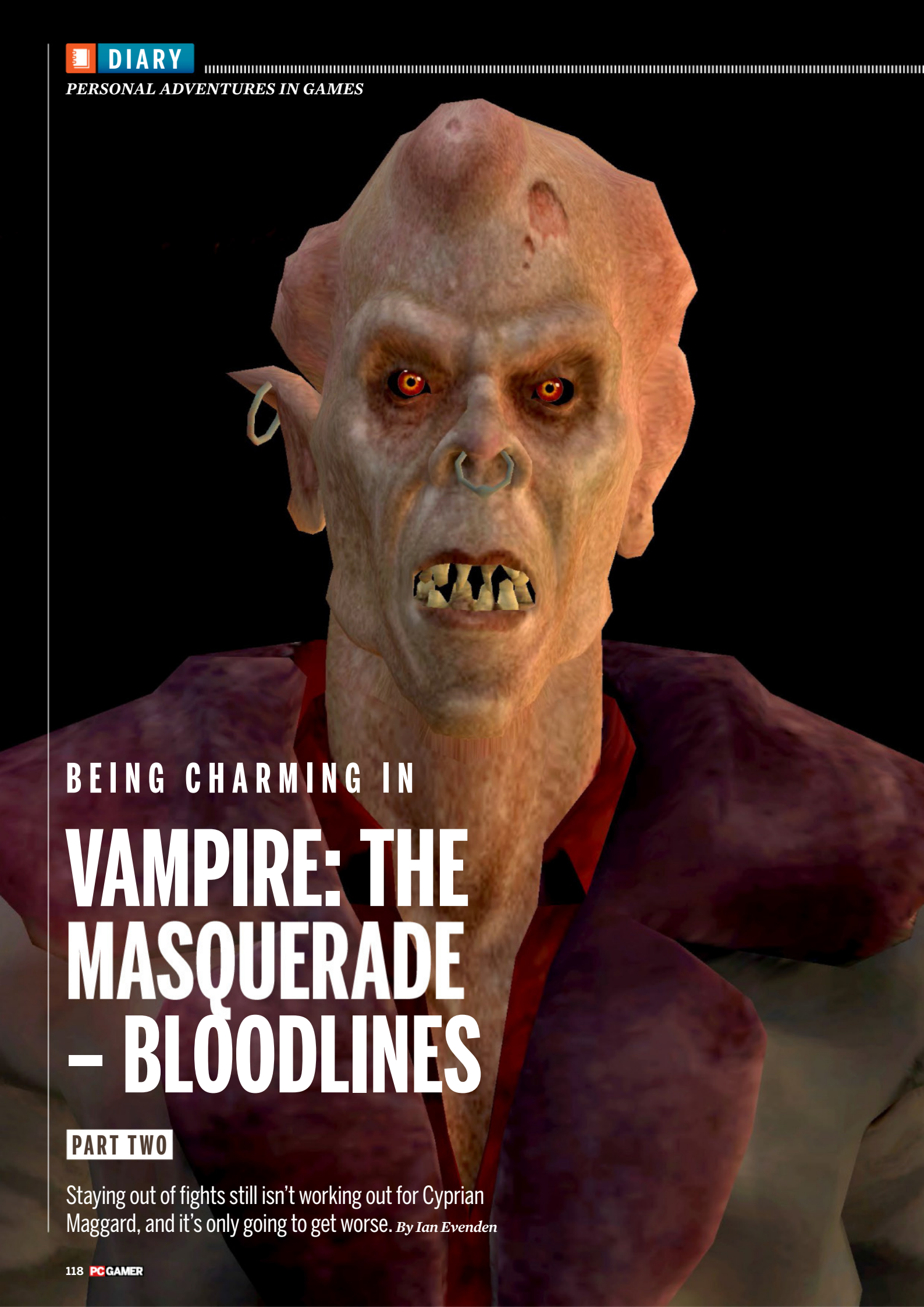
EXTRA EXPLORATION

11 Another advantage of levelling up relationships is that you'll unlock an exploration upgrade for the overworld. Unlike a *Metroidvania* where you acquire all the upgrades you need to travel, *Expedition 33* has some you can only acquire optionally, so keep a look out.



VOGUE

12 Dressing your characters in the best boutique fashion can't help but feel important. You can get new character cosmetics through quests or by finding Gestral merchants around the world and purchasing outfits from them for Chroma.

A close-up, high-resolution screenshot of a vampire character from the game Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines. The character has pale, textured skin, large pointed ears with small hoop earrings, and intense, glowing red eyes. He has a menacing expression with bared, sharp teeth. He is wearing a dark red, high-collared garment. The background is dark and out of focus.

BEING CHARMING IN VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES

PART TWO

Staying out of fights still isn't working out for Cyprian Maggard, and it's only going to get worse. *By Ian Evenden*

When we last saw our reluctant hero and fledgling vampire Cyprian Maggard, he had a problem. Not only was he getting sent on odd jobs by a variety of low-lives around the Santa Monica region, but he kept getting into fights. As a vampire of Clan Toreador, this just won't do. Cyprian is supposed to talk his way out of situations using charm, persuasion and seduction. Instead, he's punching people in the face.

So it's with this in mind that he returns to the streets. He has a quest to hand in at the Asylum nightclub, where he's met a lovely young lady, and has been doing some jobs as a bounty hunter too. It's one of these that sends our freshly minted suckhead into one of the more interesting situations he's encountered.

The bail bondsman is looking for a man called Carson, one of his regular bounty hunters, who's vanished. Luckily, he has the key to Carson's apartment, which isn't a weird thing for an employer to have, so Cyprian heads over to check it out. Clues in the apartment – such as a key laying in plain sight on top of the TV – lead Cyprian to a tattoo parlour, which is deserted. As it's nighttime, this shouldn't be a surprise, and it allows Cyprian to nose around. In the basement he answers a ringing phone, and somehow manages to agree to become a model for a medical prosthetics firm.

This is all very exciting, even more so as Cyprian did it without needing to use any of his special vampire powers. Modelling gigs, as PC Gamer readers no doubt already know, are not easy to come by. So he skips off without hesitation to see what it's all about.

AN ARM AND A LEG

And what it's all about turns out to be the extremely strange Mr Gimble, who Cyprian is invited to call Stan. He's cut off his own arm as part of his obsession with prosthetic limbs, and now he wants to take pictures of perfectly healthy specimens?

Nope, nothing suspicious here. He heads off downstairs, leaving Cyprian to explore... and he quickly comes across blood-soaked operating tables, chairs kitted out with claw-like devices and, possibly, tubes to

vacuum away the blood. There's even a picture of a clown on the wall, marked 'Dad'. This is fine.

In the depths of the building, Cyprian discovers Carson. He's locked in a cell and has had his index finger amputated, but he's not in as bad a way as the chap in the next cell, who's just a limbless torso. Out of nowhere, Gimble appears and attacks him with a severed arm... and Cyprian ends up punching him in the face. A lot.

The fact this keeps happening, dashing Cyprian's dreams of being a suave, smooth-talking vampire, suggests that either he's not nearly as charismatic as he thinks he is, or he's playing the wrong game. Perhaps he should go

OUT OF NOWHERE, GIMBLE APPEARS AND ATTACKS HIM WITH A SEVERED ARM

and play *Skyrim* and level up his Speech skill. Still, with Gimble dead Cyprian is able to pick up the bloody limb and pretend he's in *BioForge*, and at least he's made some money by finding Carson.

ASYLUM SEEKER

So Cyprian heads for the Asylum nightclub, and the flirtatious Jeanette. It's actually her twin sister Therese he's looking for, but oddly she's not there – it occurs to Cyprian that he's never seen them in the same place. But that doesn't matter. The funny thing about the Asylum, away from the dancefloor at least, is that it's full of mirrors – there's one in the hallway outside the office, another in the en-suite (three toothbrushes, just like in Cyprian's apartment) and best of all a heart-shaped unit with lightbulbs around the rim right there in the sisters' office/bedroom space with a laptop right next to it, suggesting someone sits there.

None of the vampires can use these mirrors, as they don't reflect due to the silver backing used (or possibly some sort of kooky interaction with light, as they don't cast shadows either) so they're a bit redundant.

Moving on, Jeanette is in a fine friendly mood, and

Cyprian is able to try out his silver tongue on her. Not like that. His flirty lines seem to please her, though not enough to prevent her from sending him on yet another quest. This one won't take long, apparently, and Cyprian is told not to turn it into a massacre. Which could be a problem, the way things have been going.

It also exposes a wonderfully grey area. The mission is to slash paintings and steal charity money, and a knife is provided. The destruction of art, however, isn't exactly something a young aesthete like Cyprian would like to do (and there's the small matter of stealing from charity too), but he decides it's worth it upon seeing the paintings, which lack much in the way of artistic value. To get into the gallery

THE RULES

1. Don't kill innocents.
2. Don't fight: scheme and manipulate instead.
3. Avoid losing humanity as much as possible.



he manages to persuade the guard outside to open the door by impersonating the owner's assistant – a rare success for non-combat skills. Upon entering, his finely tuned artistic sense notices there is a narrative to the artworks, so he slashes them in that order, which triggers a Blood Guardian to spawn who has to be punched into the ground.

Once the violence is over, Cyprian leaves with the cash box, but this theft loses him a point of humanity. He's also low on blood after the last fight, and this is enough to push him into a state of frenzy. Out of control, he grabs the nearest pedestrian and feeds, killing him, breaking the Masquerade and causing the guard who was so friendly just now to start shooting. And that's how Cyprian Maggard ends up crouched in the stairwell of Gimble's Prosthetics, unable to open the door, hoping the police will go away.

Eventually they stop hunting him, though they're still patrolling around with their guns out, so Cyprian exits the area via a sewer. At the Asylum, Therese is angry, and sends him to speak to Jeanette at a diner. She's so livid, in fact, that he is unable to use any of his speechcraft skills on her, but at least it doesn't turn into a fight.

When he's ambushed by four thugs as soon as he walks through the diner's door, however, a fight is what he gets. Shooting them in the head doesn't work but, hilariously, his punching skills are now so powerful a single blow can send them flying through the air, blood spattering the walls, and his vampire physiology is enough to shrug off shotgun blasts. Maybe this is better than being charming? He pockets the shotgun for later.

SPLIT DECISION

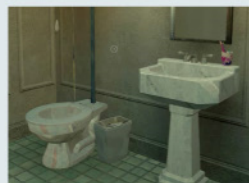
Returning to the Asylum, Cyprian notices something odd. Someone who looks like both Jeanette and Therese is standing in their office waving a gun around. He soon works out what's going on – the 'twins' were different personalities inhabiting the same body, and they're having a fight. Through constantly taking Jeanette's side in their arguments, he's able to help her overpower Therese. This has to be a victory for manipulation, if not scheming – he didn't see it coming, though the signs were all there in hindsight. Still, he's left wondering whether he made the

BELOW: Give up the games or the printer gets it.



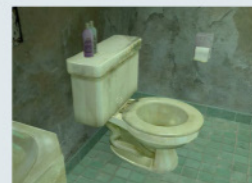
VAMPIRE THE CHAMBERMAID

The disgusting toilets of VTMB



SHAT'S ALL FOLKS

There are always three toothbrushes in the cup, leading us to believe vampires generally hang around in odd numbers.



CRAPTAIN PUG-WASH

The purple bottle on top of this toilet is 'shampoo' and it says 'obey my dog' underneath. Do wolves count?



BUM'S THE WORD

What does it take to let your toilet get into this state? The vampires' mothers would not be happy to see this.



URINE TROUBLE

There is no way I'm sitting on that. It's amazing it's hanging on – perhaps it's what's keeping the whole building standing.

right choice. Jeanette was (over)friendly, but Therese, while undoubtedly a psychopath, has risen to be the Baron of the Malkavian clan and was likely the 'original' personality. She could have made a powerful ally.

Still, Cyprian knows better than to antagonise a sad vampire lady with a revolver, so he heads off at her behest to confront Tung, a hideous Nosferatu who's hiding in an oil tank as he's unable to show himself on the streets (he's bald, lumpy and has a couple of piercings – we've seen worse at Pantera gigs). He's the same guy his contact Mercurio wanted to track down at the beginning of all this, has been in a feud with Therese that ended when Jeanette

killed her, and the locked gate that prevented access to his area is mysteriously now open. He wants Cyprian to come with him to a warehouse the Sabbat have been using, in collusion with humans aware of their vampire nature. The plan is to plant the bomb Cyprian liberated from the surfer dudes out on the beach, and blow the place to hell.

It's interesting here to see what the game does and doesn't do. It pulls the usual trick of having a dialogue option that allows you to back out, to complete unfinished sidequests or stock up on supplies. What it doesn't do is have a load of ammo waiting to be picked up and humans begging to have their blood sucked. You have to go hunting for it.

So Cyprian enters the warehouse from underneath, appearing through



HE'D THOUGHT HIS GAME WOULD BE MORE SOPHISTICATED THAN THIS

a hole in a toilet floor, and straight away there's an armed guy with his back turned, relieving himself. Instant blood and ammo top-up. There's more ammo in a crate as he creeps through some deserted bedrooms. He'd thought his game would be more sophisticated than this.

Sneaking about, Cyprian is able to take out more of the guards in the warehouse, and even manages a bit of lockpicking too. Eventually, he makes his way to the office, plants the bomb he's been carrying around with him for hours, and then faces a fight to get out of the place before it blows sky-high.

Despite being dangerous with his fists, and capable of a roundhouse kick or two, Cyprian is still vulnerable to massed gunfire, and especially to the vampires he has to face on the journey. This is the biggest fight of his unlife so far, and it just doesn't seem possible to sneak out in the same way he snuck in.

Cyprian isn't amused by the way his game keeps throwing fights at him, having sorted him into a house that values charisma and slick good looks over fighting prowess. He's feeling like he's bitten off more than he can suck. The answer turns out to

be classic videogames: a shotgun. Cyprian isn't usually good with ranged weapons, but the gun allows him to use pop-up tactics, hiding behind furniture and around corners instead of running up to thugs and trying to bop them. The Wolverine-like Sabbat vampire goes down, the building goes up, and he runs into another local character, who can change into a wolf. Beckett the wolfman is a bit of a vampire historian, and he's able to fill Cyprian in on some vampire lore – something of an odd conversation with a warehouse burning in the background, but we go with it. The Sabbat have an interest in poor old Cyprian, and it won't be the last time he has to deal with them.

Cyprian is warped back into the gas tank Tung the Nosferatu lives in. From there, he's sent to a new area, and there's a cab outside the Asylum for him. As he arrives, he's clubbed over the back of the head with a bat. A baseball bat, not a vampire bat, to be clear. Ouch. ■

ABOVE: I've always had a thing for sad goths. I can fix her, I'm certain of it.



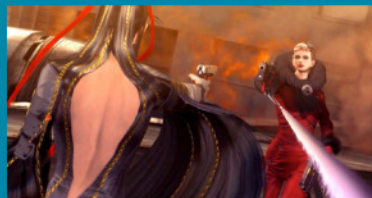
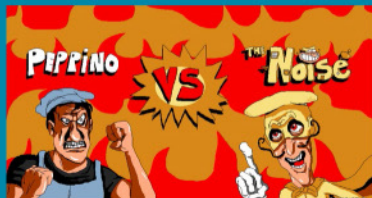


WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPEC

RIVALS

A little one on one
time *By Scott McCrae*



ABOVE: The Marauder brought the rival battle to *Doom Eternal*.



A lot of the time in games, it's easy to get caught up in the massive set-pieces and boss fights. Yes, it's undeniably super cool when Raiden batters a giant Metal Gear Ray at the start of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, but when it comes down to it, there's nothing that gets me going in a game like a good one-on-one brawl with someone on a level playing field. Raiden's fights with Jetstream Sam aren't the focus of *Metal Gear Rising's* plot – in fact, Sam doesn't have much screen time at all – but no one else has had such an impact... well, except for Senator Armstrong.

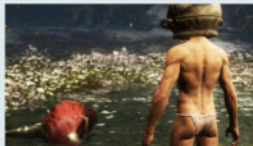
Stylish Action Games are the biggest home to this trope: *Bayonetta*, Platinum's *The Wonderful 101*, *Ninja Gaiden 2...* I could go on. But there's a reason that rivals are so prominent in the action game genre, and that's due to the series that revolutionised the genre: *Devil May Cry*.

Dante and Vergil having a scrap is one of the constants in life. Both sons of the legendary dark knight Sparda have been battling since the series started in 2001 (albeit, as the possessed Nelo Angelo) all the way through the edgy reboot *DmC: Devil May Cry*, and most recently 2019's *Devil May Cry 5*. But the game that cemented this rivalry as the all-time great that it is was *Devil May Cry 3*. Telling the story of a younger Dante, *DMC3* opens with an invitation from Vergil to meet. And after fighting hordes, you meet atop a tower in the pouring rain, and the two lock eyes for the first time.

You're thrust into an incredible bossfight between two twin brothers. It's an intense swordfight that pushes you to your limit. Once you finally get that health bar down, the cutscene plays and Vergil stabs Dante through the chest (with his own sword no less!). It's embarrassing; you get

RIVAL SCHOOLS

More all-time great rivalries



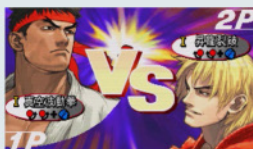
LET ME SOLO HER

The legendary *Elden Ring* player helped many conquer the Goddess of Rot.



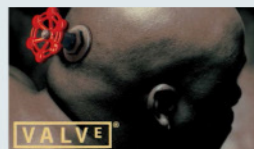
SNAKE(S) VS OCELOT

Revolver Ocelot took on both generations of Snake in *Metal Gear Solid*.



RYU VS KEN

The classic fighting game duo has been at it since 1987.



YOU VS VALVE

That Steam backlog keeps growing huh?

smacked down, and Vergil walks off, confirming that you are nothing.

Which leads me onto my other favourite thing about a rival, it's an amazing way to tell a story. The first time you fight Vergil, Dante is left in a pool of his own blood. Then halfway through the game you meet again,

THE FIRST TIME YOU FIGHT VERGIL, DANTE IS LEFT IN A POOL OF HIS OWN BLOOD

and this time the brothers come to a standstill. And right at the end of the game, Dante and Vergil step up to each other one last time, and Dante emerges victorious. This allows the player to chart Dante's growth during the formative years of his life, turning him from the cocky fighter we meet at the start, to the legendary demon hunter we saw in the original *Devil May Cry* game.

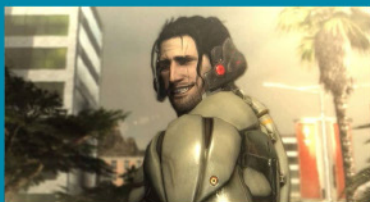
What makes it even more impactful is just how much Capcom treats this rivalry with respect. Towards the end of the game, a true big bad emerges that requires the combined efforts of Dante, Vergil and Lady to take out. But despite this set piece moment that would signal the end of most titles, the actual finale is a brotherly squabble introduced with dialogue that sounds like two ten-year-olds fighting over the Xbox.

TAKE YOUR TURN

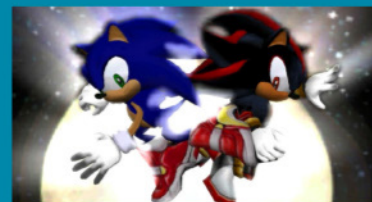
Outside of action games, the genre most known for the rival has to be RPG titles. This is mostly thanks to that game about collecting tons of monsters and battling your rival, who you definitely named 'arseface', but those games aren't on PC, so I'd like to point out another. Sega's *Like a Dragon* series started out as an action game. Over the course of those seven games, they had some crackers like Goda, Majima and *Yakuza 0's* Kuze – although that was more 'how many times do we have to teach you this lesson old man' than two equals fighting it out. But *Yakuza* never abandoned its storytelling traits when it turned into a turn-based RPG, and 2024's *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth* featured one of the best rivalries we've seen in recent years. Yamai is introduced very soon after Kasuga arrives in Hawaii, and over the course of the game, goes from a bit of a typecast scary villain to one of the most important characters to Kasuga's journey and growth.

In fact, Sega is quite good at this. When you think about Sonic villains, no doubt Shadow the Hedgehog pops into your mind. The rivalry between Sonic and Shadow is undoubtedly what made *Sonic Adventure 2* such a memorable title and has had such an effect on the series that the entire third movie was built around it.

It may not be the flashiest, but there's nothing better than two equal fighters duking it out. ■



RIGHT: *Tekken's* Kazuya and Heihachi are stuck in a loop of throwing each other off cliffs.



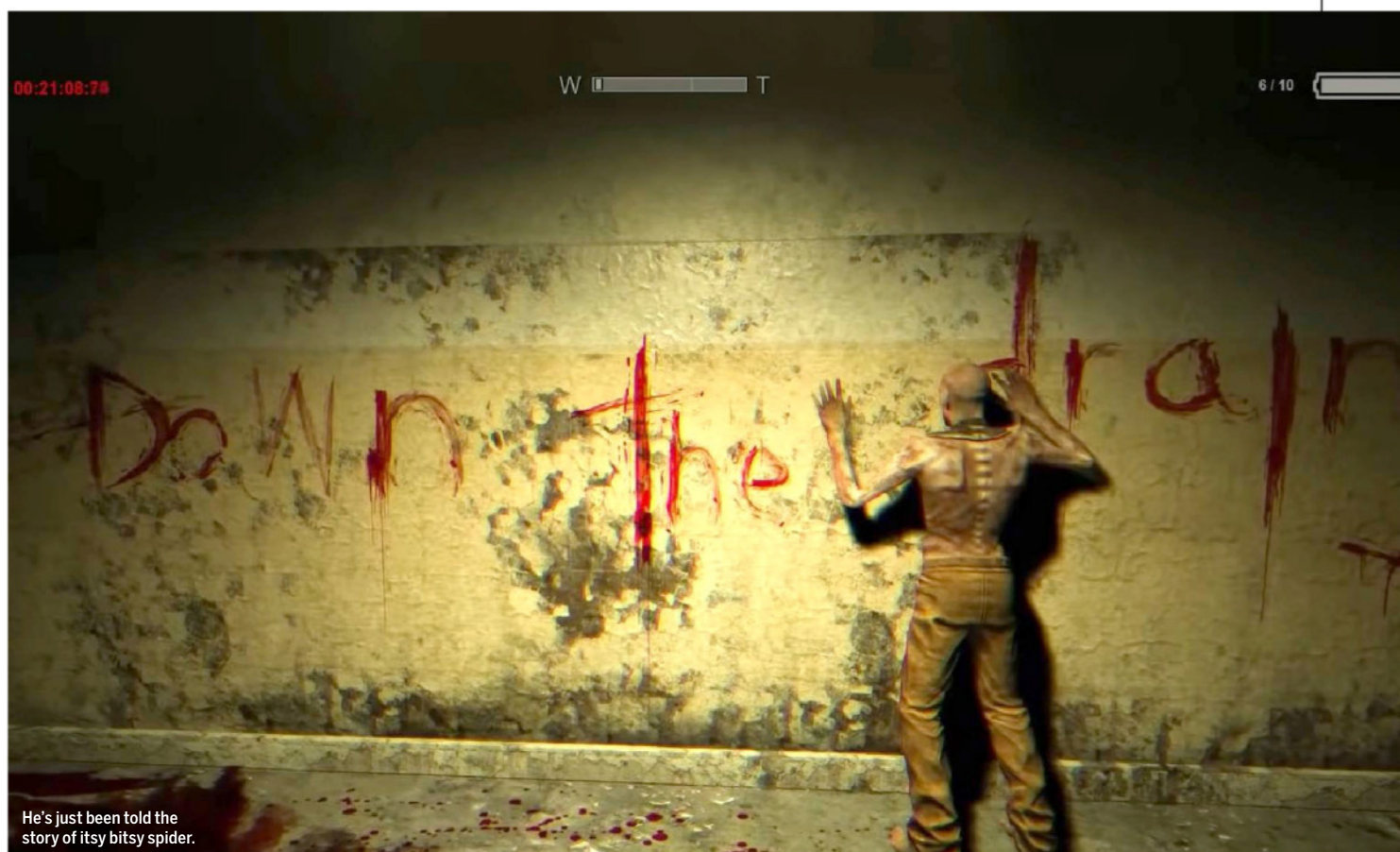


REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Some of the most perverted
dialogue I've ever experienced



He's just been told the story of itsy bitsy spider.

OUTLAST

A lifelong nightmare I literally won't outlast. *By Kara Phillips*

Horror games were never part of my repertoire when I was growing up. I just get scared way too easily. I always have done really. I used to have nightmares after watching Jumanji, and I once screamed so much at the Weeping Angel episode of Doctor Who that my mum banned me from watching it for two months. Because of this, horror was an instant write-off for most of my childhood. But when you've suddenly got a laptop that can just about handle gaming rather than relying on the family PC, and you have the confidence that you've become that little bit braver now you're a teenager, horror feels a lot less intimidating. That's until you're driving up to Mount Massive Asylum, camcorder in

hand, and suddenly it clicks why horror was advised against.

The first time I played *Outlast*, I felt I had to keep it a secret. Not only was I going against being told I wasn't allowed to play horror games, but it's not exactly a gentle introduction to the genre. Between hallways streaked with bodies and blood, and some of the most perverted dialogue I've ever experienced in my many years of gaming, it wasn't something I felt proud to share. Safe to say it took me much longer than it needed to make my way around the asylum and roll the credits, but I was left pretty scarred from what I'd just experienced.

After I finally escaped, I vowed to leave *Outlast* be and let it fester in a corner of the internet I wouldn't touch for a while. And fester it did. Each time I thought to myself I

was ready to face that level of fear again, I was reminded of the rotting smell of *Outlast*. I missed it, in its own twisted way, but it would take a lot more than memories to bring me back to that place. By a lot more, I mean about a decade.

WELCOME BACK, FRIEND

Cut to 12 years later, I'm sat in the driver's seat pulling up to Mount Massive Asylum. Surely *Outlast* couldn't be as scary so many moons on. Surely there's something about it that's ever so slightly outdated to make it harder for me to fully lose myself in the twists and turns of its labyrinthine location. But, no. I can hand-on-heart confirm that *Outlast* is just as tense and terrifying as it was when I was younger, and even more so now I understand its uncomfortable themes and perverse dialogue more rather than just being scared of its tense music and nightmarish character design.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2013

PUBLISHER
Red Barrels

DEVELOPER
Red Barrels

LINK
redbarrelsgames.com



They can't escape these bars... right?



I've even played through the second *Outlast*, the *Whistleblower* DLC, and spent an exhaustive amount of time dragging my friends through *The Outlast Trials* in the meantime, but nothing compares to walking up to the asylum and shimmying through a window to get

in, only to be met with instant darkness and a horrible feeling that something bad is about to happen to me, most likely within seconds.

As soon as your feet land on that clinical lino flooring, the sense of dread is overwhelming. I wanted so badly to close the game and find

something much more comforting to play. But I had to push on and prove to myself that I was braver than I was a decade ago. So I made my way in, albeit hesitantly, and suddenly I was transported from my PC setup as an adult to my childhood bedroom hunched over that laptop again.

WORST NIGHTMARE

Seriously, what the hell is that?

1 TIME FOR A LESSON IN PERSONAL SPACE

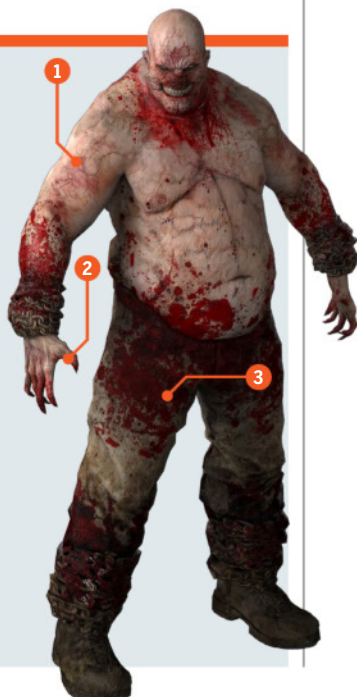
One of my least favourite traits some horror game villains have is the inability to just leave you alone. If I wasn't already looking over my shoulder for the priest or even one of the weapon-wielding twins, then I was constantly on the lookout for this meathead. Just as you think you're safe, he's always there waiting to bring you back down to earth.

2 SOMEONE NEEDS A MANICURE

I know his whole thing is ripping people's heads off, but do his nails really have to be so long? All I can think about every time he grabs me is how much dirt and bacteria must be under there. If the pain he inflicts on you isn't enough to kill you, then I don't doubt the infection that comes after will kill you either.

3 WATER WATER EVERYWHERE

Seriously, you'd think this guy would find the time to rinse his jeans at least. You're telling me in a whole asylum, there's not a single washing machine? Even the sewer water would have a better smell than all that crusted blood and all those chunks of entrails. GROSS.



CHEAP THRILLS

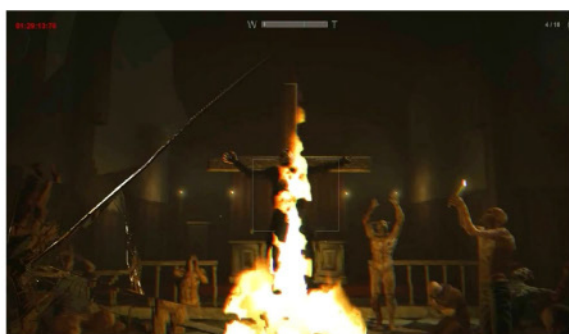
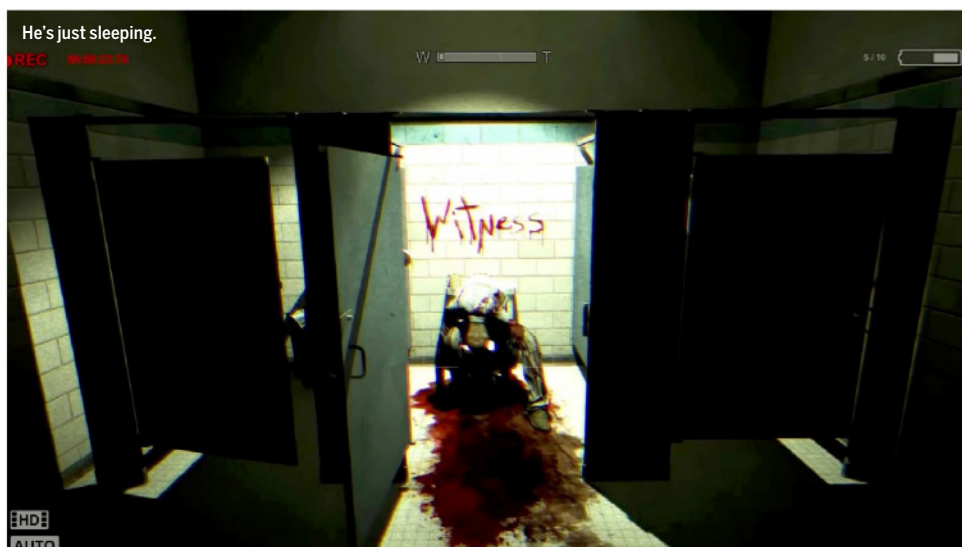
I thought I'd be able to remember or at least anticipate the first few cheap scares. They're a must-have in almost every horror game and serve as a test to see if you've got it in you to continue. The classic 'opens a door and a corpse swings through the doorway', or even the sudden hiss of television static when you step into a room. But no, it was as if I'd just picked it up for the first time. This was definitely helped by the fact I was playing with a headset which is something I lacked as a teenager, so it felt like the audio and, in turn, the setting was completely inescapable.

This also meant I could pick up on cues I had missed before, like whispering in the distance or footsteps, or even heavy breathing indicating something was hot on my tail rather than me clumsily turning around and coming face to face with a monster. This helped make *Outlast*



ABOVE: The new neighbour seems a little nosy.

RIGHT: Easy like a Sunday morning.



feel somewhat new even though the dark desolate hallways were ever so slightly familiar.

I had by no means mapped out the place in my head, since a lot of my time there before was spent running around with my eyes practically closed. But there were parts that I felt confident in navigating. That's due to the amount of nightmares I had following the first playthrough, though.

THROUGH THE LENS

I also discovered this time around that no play-through of *Outlast* is going to be the same, even years on. Of course, you're walking the same paths, facing the same enemies, and you're being told the same story. But you'll still have new moments that make you jump out of your skin. You never know when or where an enemy will rock up while you're patrolling the sewers or what clip you'll manage to capture on your camcorder, which to this day is still one of my favourite elements of any horror game I've played.

Navigating a dark space with nothing but a torch or lamp is scary, sure. So scary in fact, it's now a classic trope of horror games. But when your only way of seeing in the

YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN OR WHERE AN ENEMY WILL ROCK UP WHILE YOU'RE PATROLLING

dark is a night vision setting on a lousy, sort of grainy camcorder which you have to use sparingly, you feel a lot more vulnerable.

The fact you have to consider your batteries running out also adds that necessary extra layer of challenge, you know, on top of the impending doom of some deranged 'doctor' with a taste for blood, or a former security guard insisting you're a little pig while chasing after you. This only builds on the experience, too. Even 12 years on, the panic that strikes my heart when I get the low battery icon in the corner of my screen is unmatched. I just know the second I lose power, every single possible Variant within the asylum will come chasing after me and I'll just be stuck running aimlessly into a corner until my inevitable death.

SIGNS OF WEAR

But it's getting more obvious that *Outlast* is starting to show its age, especially when you take its newest

iterations like *The Outlast Trials* or even the older *Whistleblower* DLC in comparison. At the time of release, I remember being amazed by the graphics and how detailed everything looked, and while it still looks good now, there are some moments where you feel like *Outlast* looks a bit crunchy.

I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing, since the grain lets it naturally look like it was filmed on a camcorder which you obviously spend a lot of time using in-game anyway. But I can understand it not meeting the expectations of horror fanatics who have spent more time with supremely detailed, HD modern horror games that are so visually impressive they might as well be VR.

Yet no matter how dated it may start to look in decades to come, I think *Outlast* will always be that one horror game that haunts me. With that said, if I hadn't been brave enough to try and escape Mount Massive Asylum when I was a teen, there's no way in hell I'd feel attached to anything *Outlast* or even horror for that matter now. It still petrifies me to the very core, but I know in ten years I'll feel ready to come back again. If I haven't had a heart attack in that time, of course. ■

RORY NORRIS



Cosy games that make you question your life choices? Yeah, I'll take ten of those, please. And for sides, I'd like the most intense action you've ever seen.



IMMACULATE VIBES

CARAVAN SANDWICH

caravansandwich.com

→ Caravan in tow, you're set loose to explore the hopeful post-apocalyptic dunes and solve the mystery of your supposed-to-be-dead sister suddenly reappearing. There's something so charming about cruising around in your van and taking in the sights of Cigalo.

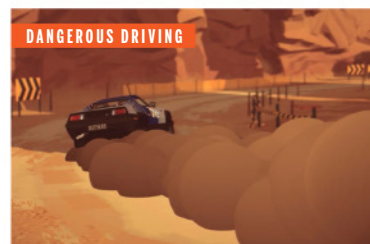


ANGRY AXOLOTL

WINDBLOWN

windblown.game

→ You can never have too many roguelikes, but it takes a lot to impress now, so I mean it when I say that *Windblown* is top-tier. Tons of gear and upgrades, a crisp dodge, and incredible art and music. What more could you want? Oh, adorable animals and large blades? Check.



DANGEROUS DRIVING

#DRIVE RALLY

drive.game/rally

→ Despite having grown up watching rally fails on VHS, I'll admit I'm not a fan of rally games. I much prefer the intense competition of track racers or the freedom of open-world racers over racing a clock. With sublime handling and vibes, *#DRIVE Rally* is a worthy exception.



SERENE SANDS

SABLE

shed-works.co.uk/sable

→ *Sable* isn't so much a game as it is an experience, especially if you're feeling lost. Gameplay generally just involves picking up odds and ends in a desert. However, the tranquillity of it all (and the coming-of-age themes) invites you to contemplate where you are in life, and where you'll go next.



MUST



PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Rory Norris



JANKY JALOPY

PACIFIC DRIVE

shed-works.co.uk/sable

→ From the moment I saw the reveal trailer, I knew this story-driven car-based survival game would be a treat. You'll need to repair and upgrade your trusty rust bucket to survive the harsh supernatural dangers of the Olympic Exclusion Zone. It's incredibly unique.



CATHARTIC CHAOS

SNOWRUNNER

focus-entmt.com

→ *SnowRunner* takes what makes trucking sims click and injects it with more carnage and challenge. Through thick mud and even thicker snow, it's your job to deliver huge cargo and repair regions after a natural disaster. Think *Ice Road Truckers* if it were a puzzle game.

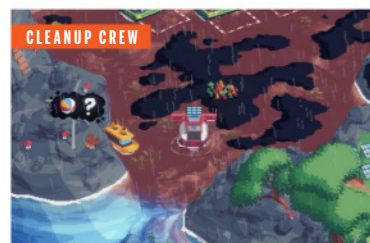


FOR KARL!

DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

deeprockgalactic.com

→ I've recommended this co-op horde shooter to everyone I've ever met, so now it's your turn. Imagine *Left 4 Dead*, but instead of hardened survivors, you're drunk dwarves with a sense of humour. Shoot bugs, mine minerals, and get out alive to upgrade your gear.



CLEANUP CREW

SPILLED!

store.steampowered.com

→ Clean up oil and other ocean waste with your humble boat. You'll earn coins for a job well done, letting you upgrade your boat to tackle even bigger messes. It's short, simple, and incredibly satisfying. It somehow captures that same 'one more round' mentality, just about lakes instead.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark

Strategic Director Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Global Editor-in-Chief	Phil Savage
Print Editor	Robert Jones
Senior Art Editor	John Strike
Online Editor	Fraser Brown
Senior Editor	Robin Valentine
Senior Editor	Rich Stanton
News Writer	Joshua Wolens
Senior Guides Writer	Sarah James
Senior Guides Writer	Sean Martin
Guides Writer	Rory Norris
Features Producer	Mollie Taylor
Staff Writer	Harvey Randall
Staff Writer	Elie Gould
Staff Writer	Kara Phillips
Production Editor	Tim Empey
Hardware Editor-in-Chief	Dave James
Hardware Managing Editor	Jacob Ridley
Hardware Writer	Nick Evanson
Hardware Writer	Andy Edser
Hardware Writer	James Bentley
Hardware Writer	Jessica Kinghorn
Hardware Writer	Jacob Fox
Senior Video Producer	Scott Tanner
Video Producer	Josh Lloyd
Video Producer	Dave Jones
Video Producer	Midas Whittaker
Social Media Editor	Natanael Albuquerque
Editorial Director, PC Gaming Show	Jake Tucker

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK	Mark Constance
Production Project Manager	Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager	Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller	Jason Hudson
Production Manager	Fran Twentyman

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing	Rachel Shaw
-------------------------	-------------

PC GAMER US

Editor-in-Chief, US	Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor	Wes Fenlon
Features Producer	Chris Livingston
AU/Weekend Editor	Jody Macgregor
AU Editor	Shaun Prescott
News Lead	Andy Chalk
Hardware Writer	Jorge Jimenez
Staff Writer	Morgan Park
Associate Editor	Lauren Morton
Associate Editor	Tyler Colp
Associate Editor	Ted Litchfield

CONTRIBUTORS

Matthew Elliott, Phil Iwaniuk, Ian Evenden, Justin Wagner, Daniella Lucas, Kerry Brunskill, Robert Zak, Andrea Shearon, Dominic Tarason, Rick Lane, Zak Storey, Abbie Stone, Scott McCrae, Andy McGregor, Matt Lochrie, Tom Sykes, Emma Withington

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Digital Producer	Nick Lee
Digital Producer	Daniel Short

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer	Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations	David Lyttleton

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director	Clare Dove
Advertising Director	Chris Mitchell
Account Director	Ben Hardy
Account Manager	Kevin Stoddart

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of Subscriptions	Sharon Todd
Circulation Manager	Matthew de Lima

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Managing Director, Games and Entertainment	Matt Pierce
Director of Group Finance	Oli Foster
Global Head of Design	Rodney Dive
Group Art Director, Games	Warren Brown
SVP Consumer	Kevin Addley

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: help@magazinesdirect.com | www.magazinesdirect.com

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6QA | Email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2025 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

How to order and access past issues: If you are an active subscriber, you have instant access to past issues through your iOS or Android device/s. Your digital magazine entitlement is available at no additional cost and no further action is required. Pocketmags library may not have access to the full archive of digital past issues. You will only be able to access the digital past issues as long as you are an active subscriber. To purchase single past issues (print format only) visit: magazinesdirect.com (click on 'Single issues' tab). Magazinesdirect.com is owned and operated by Future Publishing Limited. Subscription rates for PC Gamer (UK): £90.87 for UK, €179 for Europe, \$203 for USA, £156 for Rest of World

IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

PART 2

One thing you can count on: You push a man too far, and sooner or later he'll start pushing back. And, as the console gamers obeyed their master Stickyfellow's command to kill me, charging down the central aisle of the cathedral like a pack of feral beasts, I decided that I was already so far past the point of no return I couldn't even remember what it looked like when I had passed it.

I grabbed a grenade off my belt and rolled it down the aisle towards the approaching horde. The detonation ripped the pack apart in a shower of gore, splitting the cathedral's marble floor. Looking back at the aftershock, Stickyfellow's mirth evaporated, and in that moment I lined up a kill shot. The bullet grazed Stickyfellow's cheek. I'd missed, but it was a wake-up call for the infamous CEO and third leadership pillar of the Console Gamer Collective, who bolted into the circular enclosed stairwell to the cathedral's tower.

As I followed, I heard Stickyfellow shriek, "Kill Ray-Tracing!" his voice fading as he climbed higher. Two more CGC goons came charging down the spiral staircase, firing wildly with MP5s. I dived into a windowed alcove and, as the first henchman rushed down I ambushed him, knocking his gun upwards in a hail of 9mm bullets. I struck him in the jugular and then, pivoting behind him, used him as a human shield so his partner peppered him with bullets. I returned fire, kneecapping the goon, who dropped and cracked his skull on the stone steps.

Approaching the summit, I heard Stickyfellow furiously shout, "What do you mean he's unstoppable? You are superior to him in every way that counts. You are better trained, better equipped, you outnumber him at least 20 to one, Do. Your. Job." Diving through the roof door, shooting three more CGC goons, I watched as Stickyfellow, hanging out of the door of a hovering helicopter, laugh before shouting into the wind: "Sorry Dick, you're too late once again. The future of gaming belongs to console gamers, with us, their glorious corporate overlords, controlling their every live-service spend. Know this as you die." Stickyfellow dropped his hand and a CGC goon in the chopper lifted an RPG launcher to his shoulder.

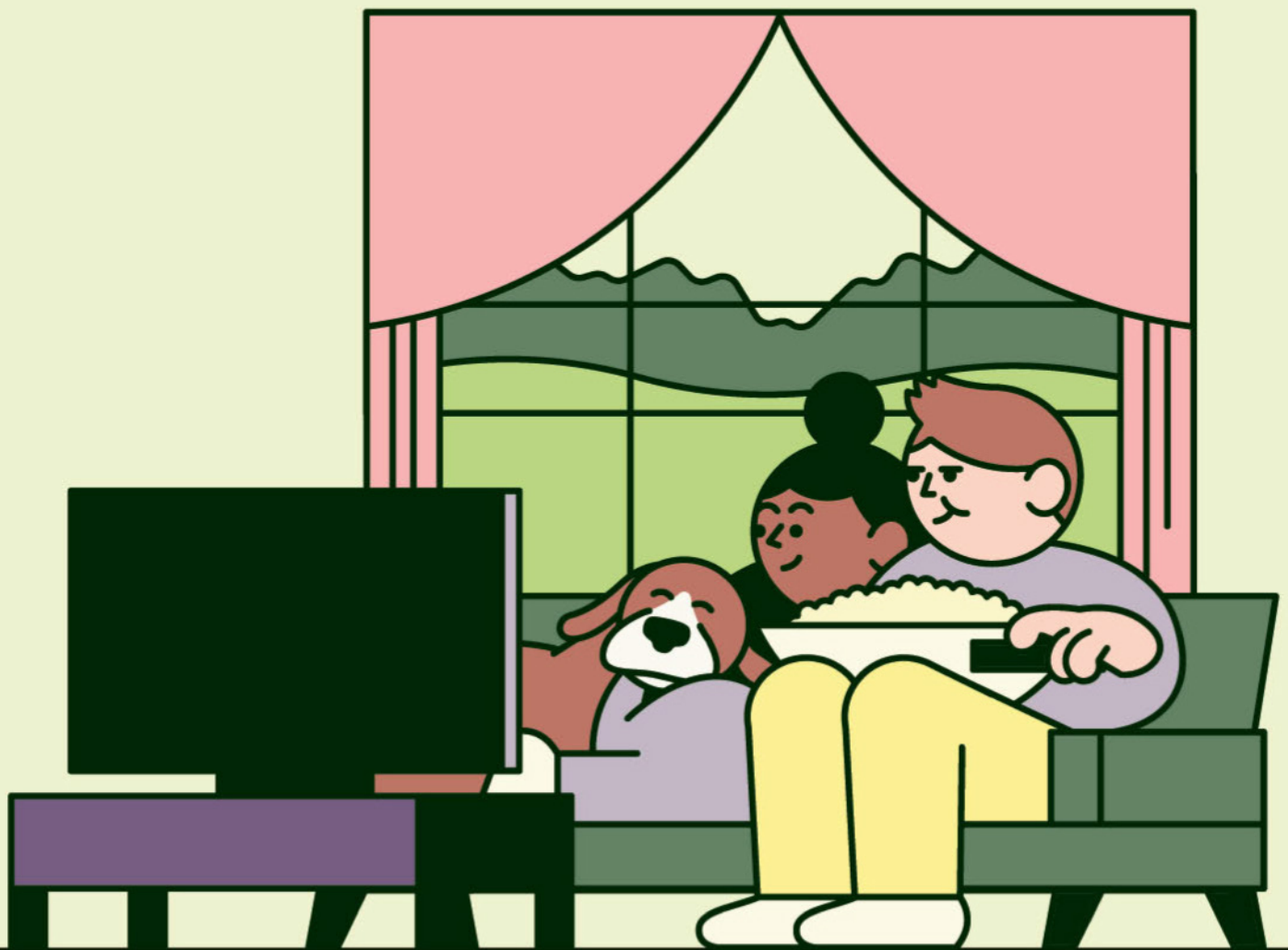
But I wasn't going to miss twice. I drew my revolver and, with its last bullet, fired just as the rocket left its launcher. The bullet made its impact on the warhead, triggering a detonation that blew me off my feet and annihilated the chopper in a blinding flash of fragmented metal. Stickyfellow was dead, one of the CGC council had fallen, and down below the lights of Canterbury City glittered like black velvet.

TO BE CONTINUED...

...UNTIL **JUNE 19**

SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

Discover cover options for car, home and travel insurance, plus broadband and more.



GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.Go.Compare).

EXCLUSIVE
£15 Discount
with code **PGA25**



FUTURE-PROOF

Join our communities



 **PCSPECIALIST**
www.pcspecialist.co.uk